

BACCANO!

1932 Drug & The Dominos



**RYOHGO
NARITA**



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Long story short, those guys aren't cut out to be fairies. That's the only sad truth. The closest thing to a fairy they have is inside his head. I guess you'd call him old-fashioned. He's real particular about keeping obligations and stuff like that. If you go back to the 19th century, that probably would've looked fine but now...

Just so you know, Keith's a way better person than I am, and respect him as family.

★ ★ ★

Berga, the middle brother... That guy's an idiot. Just an idiot. But a completely lovable idiot. I mean, he's got a heart. I mean, I know. Though I suppose he's not a complete musclehead. He's not shy about inflicting "terror" on people if he has to. Now, see, if he were smart, he could probably run the city. I mean, he's got the brains. I mean, I wouldn't want him to turn into that sort of badgie... Although he's pretty bad already.

Finally, the youngest one, Luck... He's the worst of the bunch. He always gets Llam and

collected, but actually, he's never completely cool. He probably never will be. He's not to be trusted. I mean, he's got a heart. I mean, I know. Though I suppose he's not a complete musclehead. He's not shy about inflicting "terror" on people if he has to. Now, see, if he were smart, he could probably run the city. I mean, he's got the brains. I mean, I wouldn't want him to turn into that sort of badgie... Although he's pretty bad already.

I still think of those guys as my brothers. No, they're not. They say, they're good people, sleep down. That's right. They're good guys. They're like the outlaws you see in movies. That's the biggest reason they're not cut out to be mafia.

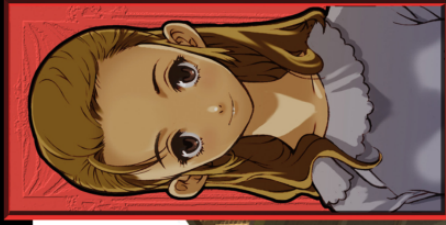
See, this ain't no fairy tale. We're in real-life New York, and it's gritty as hell.



THE THREE GANDOR BROTHERS ACCORDING TO FIRO PROCHINEZO OF THE MARTILLO FAMILY



THE GENOARD HOUSEHOLD ACCORDING TO THE LIVE-IN BARTENDER AND COOK



"This new job site is unbelievable. It's almost like some fairy tale. I thought maybe we'd wandered into a movie or a picture book."

"Still, I don't expect that."

"Expect what?"

"Expect what? The Genoard family? You said you'd never met them. Now that you mention it, you could be right."

"True. That's brought out of a fairy tale, too. You saw that mansion, right? The Genoard residence. That was no ordinary rich guy's house. As a matter of fact, that's a world we don't even know. In the upper

classes, it might be normalist to have a little girl headin' the place. That's how I decided to think of it. Princesses show up all the time in fairy tales, right?"

"Now that you mention it, you could be right."

"See? On top of that, the old butler guy and the lady housekeeper were weirdly friendly. Most of the rich folks and their fortunes that I've seen up til now were real

snoopy kikes."

"Not only that, but they didn't discriminate against me for being Asian."

"Maybe they can be that laid-back because of all that money. Or I guess they're just used to it. You know, I've never met a not a call to a good friend like you can make."

"I don't think we even need to try, do you?"

"Nah. It doesn't matter how or why they're good people. I know that for sure. That just makes me more worried though. Is

being good going to make it harder for that young lady to keep her head above water when the world knocks her around?"

"I don't think we need to worry there, either. She's much more practical than we are. You're right. She's tough. She's rich, and good, and strong on the inside."

"Plus she's cute. I bet she grows up to be a beauty." As a fairy tale princess, she's just about perfect, huh? She is.

**THE
RUNORATA
FAMILY
ACCORDING
TO THE
HITMAN VINO**



"Hello?—Oh, it's you, Luck. That's rare. You never contact me... No, I'm happy. How're Keith and Berga and everybody? I see. That's great to hear.

"...Huh? The Runoratas? You mean the Runorata Family from New Jersey?

"...Yeah, I know a bit about 'em.

"...What are they like? Let's see... That sure has been a legend. A guy named Bartolo once built the syndicate from the ground up in just one generation. The syndicate's got a huge variety of people, and Bartolo's leadership is what keeps 'em all together. If we're just comparing the strength of your organization to the strength of theirs, it's cats in front of their lion, or no, maybe mice.

"—Hold up, though. If they're rumbling with you... That must be Gustavo, the guy in charge of their advance into New York. Or maybe Begg, the one in charge of drug distribution. Or maybe the other one, Quinn. Nah, I've never seen their faces, but I've heard rumors about the Begg guy. All weird ones. Like he's actually a magician, or he's

**ROY MADDOCK
ACCORDING TO FRED, A DOCTOR
LIVING IN NEW YORK CITY**

What sort of fellow is Roy? Hmm... To summarize public opinion, I believe the term *human scum* might be apt.

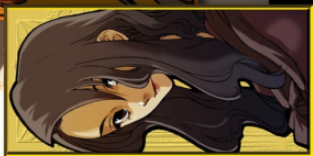
I feel no particular contempt for him, but the moment he got involved with drugs, it was inevitable that the world would see him that way. However, even if he hadn't... I know that as a person, he's a decent fellow. He's got a good heart, and he's got a good mind.

For a long time, you see, he's been constantly injuring himself or getting sick, among the doctors in town, he's rather notorious. For the most part, the cause lies in the man himself. From what I'm told, Roy has always been reckless. He never considers the consequences. How do I put this...? He's the type of person who can't visualize the fact that if you light a campfire and leave it unattended, it'll start a house fire and burn to death. That example was too extreme, but you get my meaning.

He's certainly the type of individual the world calls trash... However, he doesn't seem to be headed down a degenerate path of his own volition. He simply acts before he's formed any judgments about good or bad, benefit or loss. I suspect his ego is undeveloped. In life, he is certainly passive with regard to his environment. That is, he strikes me.

As the doctor, I have no right to judge him, but I do believe that the only thing he has going for him is his mind. Neither past nor future exists. As long as that moment shines, all is well. Will he manage to turn his life around? I really couldn't say, and I'm not especially interested.

That said, you'd hardly quote my assistant here—if he were an assistant. He's a doctor, and he's got a lot of things to do. I'm sure he'll be able to face her when that happens, perhaps.



immortal, that sort of stuff. Crazy, right? He-ha.

"...So, what about 'em?

"...I see. Understood. For now, just hold on until I, until the *Flying Pussyfoot* limousine express gets there. If you do, it won't matter if you're up against a lion or a magician. I respect your three mice and I'll put you upon the throne. I'll be there, and I'll be there, and I'll be there. You need a fairy tale hero and that would be me.

"Relax. Fairy-tale heroes always win. So, you know...

"...Don't you die before I get there!"



**THE
INFORMATION
BROKERAGE**
ACCORDING TO
**RONNY SCHIATTO,
MARTILLO FAMILY
CHIAMATORE**

What exactly are you trying to ask me?

I doubt anything I can say will be useful to you people, but... Well, never mind.

...The information brokerage? Ah, you mean the *Daily Days* newspaper.

The existence of those guys is something straight out of fantasy.

To the average person, someone who knows things about you that even you don't know very easily becomes an object of respect and fear.

I've lived for a rather long time, but... in this world, that brokerage is a fairly alien entity. When you become involved with them, you fall prey to the illusion that you've become the protagonist of a fairy tale... What's that look for? You don't believe me? Well, never mind.



If information is power, their power is certainly great. I'd wager that's precisely why they generally try to stay neutral with regard to the world.

However, even they aren't omniscient. No one knows everything about the world.



There cannot be such a being. Precisely because there is no such being, the spiritualistic word *omniscient* is allowed to exist.

As I mentioned before, in this world, they are a completely absurd entity. To that extent, you could say they have universal knowledge. As an entity that is extremely close to omnipotence, they just barely manage to keep themselves in this world...although, they themselves may not be aware of this.

...You don't understand what I'm talking about? I did tell you I wouldn't necessarily be able to say anything useful... Well, never mind.

In any case, avoid dealing with them any more than you have to. Particularly if you wish to live an ordinary life within the bounds of reality.

BACCANO!

1952 Drug & The Deminos

VOLUME 4

RYOHGO NARITA

ILLUSTRATION BY **KATSUMI ENAMI**



NEW YORK

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RYOHGO NARITA

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PRELUDE



PRELUDE

1931 December Hell's Kitchen, West Manhattan

That sound. It was as if it were flowing, as if it were soaking in.

Dawn tinted the streets, and a gentle melody enfolded them.

It was faintly melancholy, reminiscent of the sorrows of mankind.

As if pitying the end of something. As if greeting the beginning of something.

Under an exquisitely clear sky, it made the air in the streets tremble, quietly and profoundly.

As if it were changing the colors of the sooty streets to monochrome.



BEGG

1931 Early December Somewhere in New York

In a dimly lit room, two men were silent.

Even the beating of their hearts dissolved into the stillness, and their existence seemed very tenuous.

“Please understand, Begg. This is the last time I’ll be able to meet with you to negotiate.”

With no prelude whatsoever, the tall man broke the impasse. Prompted by this, sound, movement, and color seemed to return to the pair’s surroundings. As if to confirm that time had begun to move again, the tall man—Maiza Avaro—heaved a great sigh.

“Begg. Say something. I can’t leave without an answer from you, and depending on that answer, I may end up hurting you.”

Maiza looked sincerely troubled, and the man he’d called Begg finally opened his mouth. Vocal cords subdued, he emitted words that sounded rather choked.

“A-a all right. I-I-I’ll do...as you...say.”

Begg’s eyes wandered vacantly through space. Only his heart had turned to face Maiza.

“I w-w-won’t...d-d-distribute d-d-drugs on...Martillo Family...territory...anymore.”

On hearing those words, Maiza looked relieved. He walked over to his old friend.

“Thank you, Begg. Now we won’t have to be your enemies.”

In addition to pleasure, there was sadness in Maiza’s expression. After a short silence, he spoke to the man in front of him again. However, his tone held not situational social diplomacy but genuine feeling for his old companion.

“From this point on, I’m speaking not as a Martillo Family executive but as your friend. Begg, if possible, don’t distribute drugs in town—”

“I...I...I refuse. I—I can...do...what I...want.”

“Begg.”

“I...I...I became an alchemist...because I wanted to overcome...

my limits...as an apothecary. M-my dream, my wish, my mission... It —it's all about to come true. Two hundred years, and finally, finally, finally, I think...I'm about to get it. A—a way...to make...people... happy."

On hearing those words, Maiza shook his head slightly.

"Are you still saying that? No such thing exists."

"I can do...it. I...just...want to...make...people...into...the world. I want...to make...a world...for...each...individual...person. The... best...world...for that person. If I can...make that state...p-permanent, people can... They can die...smiling."

"In other words, you'd destroy the human race. Don't you see? They'd use drugs to bask in their delusions until they died, leaving no descendants, not even eating..."

"O-of course...that's...only...the first...stage. S-someday, I'll make...a drug...that...lets people...keep...dreaming...in their hearts... while...they're...awake...and going...about...their business...as... humans. The sort...that...doesn't...damage their bodies, only... makes...them...feel happy."

At Begg's "dream," which was like an elementary schooler's essay, Maiza sighed a little.

"You'll exhaust their souls. Why can't you understand that?"

"Ha-ha-ha. You're saying...that you...of all people...believe...in something as...unscientific...as...souls?"

"At the very least, we aren't in any position to be saying *scientific* and *unscientific* anymore. You know that already, don't you? Not after we made a deal with a demon and became immortal."

Immortal. The word sounded trite, but it was an eternal contract that linked the two of them. It granted immortality, which they'd gained from the demon, and...the curse of consuming one another.

They were able to "eat" each other, through their right hands.

The ability to devour all the other's knowledge, their past and their experiences, and make them their own. In old Japan, there was a practice where a sorcerer would take several poisonous animals, such as centipedes, scorpions, or snakes, and place them together in a vessel where they would consume one another until only one remained. It was believed this survivor was the strongest of its fellows and the cannibalism had concentrated all the venom inside it.

Truly a curse.

In response to Maiza's words, Begg fell silent for a while.

Then he argued just to argue, looking cross:

"People...seek...pleasure...on...instinct. I...only...want...to... pursue...that."

"Pleasure that's overstepped human instincts will be abused. Please don't forget it."

On that note, Maiza turned to leave the room.

“Maiza, th-th-thank you...for...not...eating...me.”

“...The next time you say something like that, I'll get angry.”

After Maiza had gone, Begg stuck a syringe in his arm.

The drug's purity was far higher than anything on the open market, but still he couldn't feel it.

He was living through eternity, and by now his chemical tolerance was extremely high.

He could no longer seek pleasure on his own.

But what he couldn't do, he continued to seek for other people.

Even if there was no meaning in the act.

GANDOR FAMILY

“I tell you, it’s a dangerous world these days.”

Contrary to the young man’s words, the New York sky was perfectly clear and tranquil.

The sun had just reached its zenith, and it shone down warmly into the alley, which was hemmed in by redbrick walls.

Although the alley was in Manhattan, it was a little ways away from the cluster of skyscrapers. In front of a used bookstore surrounded by faded tenements, the young man asked the proprietor another question:

“Don’t you think so? The recession shows no sign of improving, and the government’s response always seems about to change something, yet never does. We go around in circles, while business and public order continue to slump. I expect it makes it difficult for you to relax and ply your trade, doesn’t it?”

“No, sir. Thanks to you, my store’s managing to get by somehow.”

The proprietor of the bookstore spoke humbly, although the young man before him was about his son’s age. The shopkeeper’s gestures and tone were perfectly meek, but a complicated look simmered in his eyes.

“Really? You don’t seem to be getting many customers... If there’s anything we can do to help you, just say the word, anytime.”

“But, sir! I don’t even pay you for protection; I couldn’t put you to that sort of trouble...”

“We haven’t sunk so low we’d take protection money from used bookstores. If you’re ever in need, we’ll fix you up with enough for living expenses. We’re in your debt, after all.”

“I couldn’t possibly, sir! It’s thanks to you and the other Gandors that I’m able to relax and focus on my business. You don’t need to go that far for me!”

This was the answer the young man had expected. Not many people could meekly say, “Please do loan me some money” when they heard those words from him.

The Gandor Family was a small syndicate that controlled a very tiny portion of the streams of money and people that jostled each other in Manhattan. Their territory wasn’t large, but within it, their

influence was absolute.

Years ago, the outfit had managed only half the territory it held now, but since the boss's seat had been handed over to the three brothers—his sons—the territory they controlled had begun to expand vigorously. They simultaneously protected and terrified the residents, in the old-fashioned way, and they avoided interacting with other syndicates any more than was strictly necessary. Other than nonaggression pacts, they took no protection from larger organizations and refused to place themselves under their control. They simply and stubbornly stood their ground.

Naturally, in order to do that, they often had to get far rougher than any other organization their size would have been able to manage.

...And one of those bosses had just told the bookstore owner that the world had "gotten dangerous." Was it some kind of joke? Keeping that question locked inside his heart, the proprietor smiled at Luck Gandor, the youngest of the brother dons.

At first glance, it seemed to be an amiable smile, but it didn't go past his lips. On the other hand, the proprietor's eyes weren't smiling at all, and in the depths of his soul, he felt an indescribable terror.

The old bibliophile spoke rapidly, hoping to shake the feeling—

"Ha-ha-ha, well, you know how it is. I trust everything's going smoothly for you and your family, Mr. Gandor?"

"No, no, even we have a worry or two."

Shaking his head, the young boss began to expose just a little of his position. The subtle extent to which he did this was an important factor in determining whether his organization gained the trust of the regular citizens.

However, he couldn't show true weakness. As the shadow king of the neighborhood, the syndicate's struggles revealed in situations like these were often things that troubled the residents as well. As a matter of fact, for the most part, the syndicate guys made it sound as though they themselves were troubled, when in fact the only ones who were really in trouble were the residents they were talking to.

"You see, there are things we can't even look you in the face over. The matter of those drugs, for example."

"Drugs...? No, no... The youngsters are just bringing those in from somewhere on their own—that's all!"

"Still, it's a fact that they're here."

The Gandors didn't deal in drugs at all. This was another reason the people in their territory trusted them, but the truth was that their organization simply wasn't strong enough to handle the narcotics trade yet.

If they'd had that sort of power, they might have gotten involved,

and then again, they might not have. This was a thought Luck had from time to time, but in the end, the fact that they didn't have the strength for it didn't change. Personally, Luck wanted to avoid losing the trust of the people who sheltered them by carelessly getting involved in something destructive. The Gandors were tied too deeply to the residents of their territory to sow the stress and chaos that drugs brought. However, these thoughts were pure calculation.

Berga probably hasn't thought about the profit in drugs, and it's likely that Keith genuinely detests them.

His mind drifted to thoughts of his middle brother, Berga, and their older brother, Keith.

If roles were assigned to the three brothers, Keith's was protection, Berga's was fear, and Luck's was cunning. These were, quite simply, the impressions the three gave the people around them, particularly the upstanding citizens.

Keith's protection of the residents seemed to stem from a sort of pride rather than from morals. For that reason, when it came to getting involved with people's lives or deaths, there was a line he refused to cross. Working from that fact alone, there was scarce possibility that the Gandor Family would ever branch out into drugs.

However, an abnormality had unmistakably started to occur within the area they managed.

Lately, a new type of drug had begun circulating in their territory, slipping through the gaps in their control.

It hadn't turned into a huge uproar yet, but rumors of the drug were spreading steadily. Finally, just the other day, the actual substance had been delivered to the Gandors.

Once they knew it really existed, they couldn't ignore it.

No matter what, they'd have to pinpoint where it was coming from and settle the issue.

Luck's vulpine eyes narrowed even further, and the dark smoldering inside him gradually grew fiercer.

"What's this? A screenplay? That's rather unusual."

On seeing Luck pick up a worn booklet, the shopkeeper spoke, his smile widening...

"Yes, sir—if it strikes your fancy, go right ahead and take it!"

"I couldn't do that."

Shutting the matter of the drugs inside his heart for the moment, Luck drew a thick billfold out of his jacket.

For a moment, as he reached for the bills in the wallet, both his hands were occupied.

"Bweh-heh."

Abruptly, Luck heard an odd groan behind him. Curious, he

turned around.

But just as he did so, the blade of a knife swept through his throat.
“Ghk...”

A sharp heat, and the unpleasant pain of metal scraping against cut flesh. By the time Luck understood it, bright blood was already spurting out, dyeing his vision solid red.

“Yeeee?!”

On seeing Luck topple to the ground with a *thud*, the shopkeeper finally grasped the situation.

Beyond the spray of blood, a lone man stood in the sunlit road.

He was middle-aged; his quivering skin had a sickly sheen to it, and his clothes were ragged. He had a knife in his hand, and his eyes glared wildly.

“M-m-mur-mur-murdeeeeeeraaaAAAAAaah!”

The sudden catastrophe had left the shopkeeper inarticulate; he was petrified with fear, unable to move.

“You saw kill, me, kill—kill **kill** kill witness **kill** Luck killed, killed, saw it, saw, you saw, kill-kill-kill-kill, witne-kill-Luck-kill-bookstore-kill-k-k-k-k-k-k-k-k-k-kill, **kill** you, kill—kill—”

The man had completely lost his focus. The incoherence seemed rooted in his brain rather than his mouth.

“YeaAAaaaAAAaagh?!”

The attacker raised his large knife, brandishing it at the shopkeeper. It was the blade that had just slashed Luck’s throat, and Luck’s blood was

Ignoring the confused proprietor, Luck picked up a red magazine as though nothing had happened.

Then, tearing its cover to shreds, he spoke to the shopkeeper with a cold smile.

“Well, well. That was a close shave. If I hadn’t instinctively blocked with this magazine, I’d be dead.”

“Huh? But, um, no, there was...blood...”

“You saw the fragments of this cover scatter and misinterpreted it. It really was very sudden.”

“But—”

The shopkeeper hung on doggedly. In response, Luck sprinkled the fine bits of red cover around.

“Ah, I’ll need to compensate you for this book.”

No sooner had he spoken than he pressed a thick stack of bills into the shopkeeper’s hand. The sum was enough to keep the man well-fed for a month, let alone cover the cost of the book.

“N-no, I—uh! I can’t take all this!”

Ignoring the proprietor’s yelp, Luck folded his fingers around another stack of bills, repeating himself emphatically:

“What that idiot cut was this book. Understand?”

On hearing that, the shopkeeper couldn’t argue. He only nodded.

“Excellent. Intelligent people do very well in business. Give it your best, please.”

Luck had already turned his back on the shopkeeper, and he began to walk away, carrying the man with the dented temple over his shoulder. Their sizes were far too mismatched: He looked like an ant carrying a dead beetle.

In parting, he lifted his hand in a casual wave to the shopkeeper:

“It really is a dangerous world...isn’t it?”

THE WEALTHY

1930 October Somewhere in New Jersey

It began with an odd pair of burglars.

That day, Eve Genoard's heart was filled with unease.

She was fifteen. She'd been born as the sheltered youngest daughter of a very rich local family, and there was still something childlike about her. That was all there was to say about her: The girl had no other defining characteristics to speak of.

A few days previous, her grandfather, the head of the family, had passed away, and the Genoard household was in a state of confusion.

Her grandfather had been kind, and Eve was terribly sad that he was dead, but her unease had another source.

Her older brother: Dallas Genoard. He'd heard the news and returned from New York.

He was nice to Eve, but she just couldn't bring herself to like him. After all, when he interacted with anyone besides her, the only word for Dallas was *lowlife*.

When he'd returned to the house, his eyes hadn't held any sadness over his grandfather's death at all.

Instead, they were filled with something ominous. Some dark, secret hope.

Almost as if he were planning to kill someone...

This state had been one of the earliest in the union to develop industry, and her grandfather had built a vast fortune in a single generation. What sort of business had he started here, in this country town far from the state capital of Newark, that had allowed him to earn a fortune? All Eve had heard was that he ran a factory, and she hadn't been especially interested in knowing more. A big factory in the forest. Neither her father nor her grandfather had taken Eve anywhere near it, and she hadn't tried to go. As a result, she had absolutely no idea what her family manufactured.

However, she was aware that they belonged to the class that was

commonly referred to as *moneyed*.

She also knew that this thing called wealth sometimes led human hearts far astray.

When she was taken to society functions, she saw all sorts of people: those who clung to wealth, those who coveted it, those who manipulated it, and those who loathed it. She witnessed its elegance and its ugliness.

Having had these experiences, she was able to pick up on two things.

One was that her grandfather's legacy would probably amount to an enormous sum, far more than enough to lead people awry.

The other...was that her brother Dallas had been completely taken in by its glamour.

Even so, there was nothing she could do. At the same time, she was aware that if things went on this way, something she cherished would collapse.

Terror regarding the approaching tragedy, anger at her cowardice: She was at a sensitive age, and being caught between these two feelings was eating away at her nerves.

When she'd been filled with unease about these things, involuntarily, she prayed to God.

She asked for a miracle.

I just want to be free of this anxiety. That's all.

Under the covers, as if she were making the wish of a lifetime, she prayed and prayed.

...And, abruptly, a miracle presented itself.

Late at night, when darkness and silence had enveloped the mansion, two intruders appeared in her room.

Before Eve even had time to scream...she froze, her eyes round.

The man and woman who'd slowly opened the door were dressed like American Indians.

The man wore a short coat of animal pelts over bare skin, and his lower body was encased in rough hemp trousers. The woman wore a matching outfit, and their clothes were ornamented with beads in geometric patterns.

They wore native war paint, too, and large feather headdresses.

The strangest thing of all was that both were white people. If it hadn't been for that, she might have just screamed.

For a moment, Eve had no idea what was happening, and then the couple turned to her and said, firmly but quite casually:

“Shh. Don’t make a sound! We’re nobody suspicious.”

“Hide us for a little while, okay? Just a little while!”

The two had large sacks on their backs, like the one Santa Claus carried, and several bills peeked out of the openings. The bottoms of the sacks were lumpy with what were probably jewels and ornaments, and she knew right away what the pair really were.

Burglars. Even when she’d arrived at that answer, she didn’t panic or make a fuss. She still wasn’t quite sure why, but it might have been because they were wearing very innocent, artless smiles.

“Say, are you maybe, you know, one of the Genoards?!”

“Yes, a sheltered young lady!”

When she heard the two of them whisper-shout, the feeling of unease finally returned.

Were they going to take her hostage?

However, in mere moments, that unease dissolved. The words the two white American Indians said next were beyond anything she’d imagined—or rather, they came from an angle she hadn’t even considered.

“I see! You don’t have to worry anymore!”

“Isn’t that great?!”

Nothing they were saying made sense to her. Ignoring the bewildered Eve, the two kept right on talking:

“We’re taking all your unhappiness for you!”

“Now your family won’t have to fight!”

“It’s best when families get along!”

“Yes, you’ll be happy!”

They were so delighted that this girl, whom they’d only just met, was going to be happy that they might as well have been talking about themselves. At that point, Eve finally stumbled upon what they meant.

If the inheritance disappeared, no one would fight over it. If there was no fortune, no one’s heart would be warped.

These two were making her wish come true.

It was a horrendously selfish theory, and if anyone other than Eve had heard their story, it wouldn’t have been at all odd for them to deck the couple immediately. However, Eve was grateful to them.

After all, they’d appeared right after she’d prayed to God and used her single “wish of a lifetime.”

They must be God’s messengers. I’m sure of it.

The Genoard family had never been very religious, so Eve’s idea of what God and angels looked like was extremely vague.

Forgetting even the fact that they were dressed like Indians, Eve knelt to them.

“H-hey, Miria. Why is she worshipping us?”

“I don’t know, but since she is, we need to do something for her!”

“Hmm... I’d really like to perform a Snake Dance ritual, but that takes dozens of days, and we’d need fifty snakes. Besides, we’re not shamans, and if we did it, the great nature spirits or whoever they are might get mad at us.”

“Let’s do a Butterfly Dance, then! The one those Hopi children taught us!”

“Sure, let’s go with that.”

The two nodded briefly, then began to dance a recreational dance from the Hopi Tribe. The dance—performed by just the two of them, with no song or music—bordered on comedy, but Eve watched it earnestly.

“Miss! Miss Eve!”

The dance was interrupted by a knock at the door to her room.

“They say there are thieves prowling around inside the mansion! Is everything all right in there, miss?!”

Oh no! Hurry and hide—

When she turned around to warn the pair, they were nowhere to be seen.

The wide-open window swung in the breeze, and that was all.

Of course. They must have returned to the heavens.

The girl was prone to fantasies, and she completely failed to see the Indians clinging to the tree outside the window.

The next day, Dallas came to Eve’s room, looking terribly tired. He seemed very irritated, but at the sight of his sister’s face, he started to smile again, just a little. It was a genuine, big-brother smile, the sort she hadn’t seen in several years.

“Want me to teach you billiards, Eve? It’s been a long time.”

On the verge of tears, Eve beamed and nodded.



After that, as the burglars had said, she lived happily.

However, one year later...quite abruptly, her happiness was shattered.

1931 December

Same location

What had crushed Eve's ordinary days was a sudden onset of a great loneliness.

Her father, Raymond, and his oldest son, Jeffrey, had succeeded her grandfather as the center of the family. One day, they left for work in Manhattan, and they never came home again. Or rather, to be accurate, they did return. However, they were so horribly changed that Eve was unable to believe they were her family.

Two corpses had been discovered in a car that had fallen into Newark Bay. The police didn't tell her whether it had been an accident or murder. They said only that they were investigating, and then they left.

On top of that, she was informed that Dallas, her other older brother, was missing.

Her mother had passed away before her grandfather, and so, for all intents and purposes, Eve was the only remaining member of the Genoard family. Gradually, the servants quit and left, and the mansion grew as quiet as a ruin.

She heard that her family's "business" would be taken over by the factory directors. Eve was paid a token guarantee, and practically speaking, her only remaining assets were the mansion and the land.

Not many people would have continued to serve in a house like that, and the only ones who stayed were the butler and the black housekeeper.

"Oh, my stars and garters! Then yer fixin' to go f'real, Missy Eve?"

The plump black woman sounded impressed by Eve's resolution.

The woman, Samantha, had worked as a housekeeper all over the country; she spoke in a mishmash of accents from different regions, and absolutely everyone had trouble understanding her.

"Yes, I am."

Eve, who'd been in Samantha's care since childhood, didn't feel a shred of prejudice toward her.

"Miss, as unworthy as I may be, I, Benjamin, am confident that I can at least aid you by serving as your guide to the town."

"Benjamin, are you sure you don't mind?"

"You needn't trouble yourself over it. Serving you is my duty, miss, and it is also the one purpose in life this dotard has."

The man who said this, bowing deferentially, was a German butler

who'd served the Genoard family since Eve's grandfather's time.

Although he wasn't a very stiff person, as far as appearance went, there would have been no difficulty in calling him a stereotypical butler.

Cackling at the sight of the profoundly respectful manservant, Samantha thumped her chest.

"Whaddaya actin' all starched fer? Missy Eve, I'm a-goin' witchoo, so youse jes' rest easy."

Accompanied by these two members of her family, Eve left for Manhattan, a great, unfamiliar city.

...In search of her vanished brother, Dallas Genoard.

DOPE ADDICT

Ahhhh, this feels great. Absolute tops.

Could there possibly be any other word to describe this state?

Maybe, but I don't want to think about it, and I don't need to.

Everything's here. It's all here, inside my brain.

Everything's melting together right before my eyes. Ah, the sky and the ground and the forest and the town and the day and the night were all one, in the beginning. I've just arrived at the truth. My fingers are melting, too; my arms, my legs, my hips, my stomach, my chest, my bones, my heart... They're melting, blending with everything around me. I'm enfolding everything I see. Right now, I'm on the brink of becoming the world itself.

My eyeballs have started to melt. Ohh, I'm looking at everywhere, from everything in the world.

I can feel everything in this melted world. It's a very quiet pleasure.

At last, I've completely merged with the world.

".....y, Roy....."

A crack runs through the world.

Who's that? Who's trying to break my world? Stop, stop it, look what you've done; my eyeballs went back to their regular shape. My vision's back to normal. Oh, my body, my body's being cut off from the world. Stop it, stopstopstopstopstopstop!

"Roy..... Roy....."

My body gets reconstructed in midair, then starts falling toward the chaotic world. There's a whistling sound as I slice through the wind, and the world keeps breaking down. The sky and the ground and the people and the town and the day and the night all fall back into their separate shapes. My dream and reality part ways here, too, and only the reality keeps plummeting toward the ground.

"Roy!"

Then my body hits the ground and smashes to bits.

Staring up at an institutional ceiling, the man—Roy Maddock—gave a full-body shiver. Immediately afterward, he shot up from the bed as if he were on springs and raked his surroundings with a glare. He saw several men and women, sitting or lying down; all wore the same hollow expression.

“Roy, pull yourself together!”

In the center of his vision, a woman was yelling something.

I know this dame... It's... Oh yeah. It's my girl, Edith.

He also understood that she'd pulled him back to “this side.” Roy's eyes still weren't focusing, but he turned them away from her, clicking his tongue in irritation.

“What's with the attitude?! Roy, I thought you might really die this time, so I—”

Edith's shout clanged away in Roy's brain. The vibrations passed through his head, reverberating down his spine.

“This, after I told you over and over! After you promised you'd get yourself clean! Why are you here again?!”

The wound on his neck that he'd gotten during a previous trip started to throb, as if it had just remembered the sensation. With that, finally, his mind woke up completely and understood that it was back in reality.

Bleeeeargh.

At the same time, with no hesitation, he spat out the substance that welled up from his stomach.

Nearly colorless vomit splattered over the concrete floor. However, Edith only grimaced slightly, and none of the people around them yelled.

It wasn't a physical side effect of the drug itself. The terror and anxiety of being abruptly pulled back to reality had had an instantaneous effect on his digestive system.

There was a reason the room's floor was rough concrete. Vomiting and pants-pissing were everyday occurrences here, and it was completely undecorated in order to make it as easy as possible to clean.

In short, this was a recreation room with a specific purpose: It was dedicated to the use of a certain type of drug.

After he'd vomited to the side for a little while, Roy spoke, sounding annoyed.

“How should I know what I promised when I was sober? I don't bring no real-life stuff in here.”

“Don't you give me that! And here I thought you were back on the right track... What happened?”

In answer to her question, Roy picked up a bag of powder that

had been near him.

“You’ve got nothing to worry about. There are several drugs that have been circulating around here recently that aren’t like weed and coke. They’re new types. That means they ain’t illegal yet. I’m not committing a crime or nothing. What’s the problem, huh?”

“You know that’s not what this is about! If you keep this up, you’ll die! Do you have any idea how moronic you look when you’re hopped up? You might as well be a beached, dying octopus or squid! Just look at the faces of the people around here!”

As if to shake off the rest of the sermon, Roy raised his voice a bit roughly:

“Say what you want about me, but don’t you disrespect my friends. And hey, you’re a waitress at a speakeasy. I don’t want to hear this from somebody who’s *breaking the law*.”

Flinching a bit at those words, as one would expect, Edith fell silent, looking chagrined.

“Why not go crying to your Gandor bosses, then?” Roy sneered. “You can’t, can you? The Gandors are tough on drugs. Plus, this is the stuff their enemy the Runorata Family is spreading around! You’ve known I was hooked on this stuff for ages, and you kept quiet about it. The Gandors’ll probably kill me, but you won’t get off scot-free—”

Having ranted that far, Roy abruptly fell silent. He’d realized that Edith was tearing up.

“I don’t care what happens to me, it’s just—I’m being quiet because I don’t want you to *die*, Roy! But I think I’m at the end of my rope there, too! If I have to watch you break like this, you...you *should* just go die!”

Once she’d screamed the last of those words, she left Roy without looking back.

As Roy heard the door slam, his expression began to crumple rapidly.

“Wait, I, why did... Why did I make her cry? No, I— ...Yeah, that’s right, I broke a promise, so I shoulda apologized, right? That was wrong, I...huh? Why did I do that?”

As he thought back over what he’d done, sadness and regret welled up together in his heart.

“Wait, wait, wait! *I* was wrong. No matter how you look at it, it couldn’t be anyone but me. Why was *she* crying? That’s wrong. I’m the one who should cry, right? I’m the one who shoulda gotten yelled at and cried, right? That’s not okay, hey, wait, waitwait, wait, why aren’t you here, why, wait, please wait, c’mom, c’mom...”

Roy lowered his head and began to sob, quietly.

“Wait... Please, wait. How’m I supposed to apologize this way...?”

Watching him, a man and woman in a corner of the room began talking quietly to each other.

"The girl should just break up with that loser," the woman whispered.

"Uh? Hunh, their relationship ain't so shallow a little fight like that could bust it up."

The drugs seemed to have worn off for the pair a while back, and they were watching Roy with comparatively clear eyes.

"Besides, the stuff the dame said was wrong," the man continued.

"What part?"

"Even if the Gandors don't tumble to this, that Roy fella's gonna die soon. If you look at it that way, he'd have a better shot at surviving if she snitched on him to the Gandors and begged."

"Die? You mean fly a bit too high? But they said that drug's safe for you, physically..."

"Well, that's obviously just a Runorata lie! And even if it were true, it's like calling down the Grim Reaper, right into your body. No way to get away from that... See, that guy, he got high on heroin, just once, and when he did, he gashed up his neck with his fingernails. Shredded it. That ain't a normal reaction. He's too sensitive to drugs. You probably don't know, but with heroin, you don't get high the first time. It just makes you sick. You do it a few times, get used to it, and *then* you dive into the other side. That guy, though, he flew somewhere weird on his very first try."

He drew a small wallet from an inner pocket and took a few bags of powder from inside it.

"After he landed in the hospital, Edith frantically talked him down. Well, he'd just started, so he managed to shake the hop pretty easily, but then he went right out and tried the stuff the Runorata fellas are scattering around. He fell for that idiotic 'No physical withdrawal symptoms' line real easy. I mean, c'mon, there's no way anything's *that* good!"

As the man spoke, he opened a new bag of drugs.

"Well, and I'm the bonehead who knows that and still does it. As a rule, most guys who get into drugs are idiots. But that's the thing. That's what's good about it... That's it. Heh-heh, heh-ha-ha."



I have to apologize to Edith.

I left the room. That's a start. But I've got no idea how to face her.

This time, this time for sure, I'll quit. If I do, she'll understand, too. And anyway, I used up the last of my money on this one bag. They said it was some new kind of upper. Uppers are rough when you come down, but

But why am I so scared, when I know that? Maybe it's not a hallucination or a delusion, maybe it's real, maybe there's really something behind that door— Stop! Don't think! If you think, you're finished! You lose! You'll die! Dammit, if I just had those drugs from a minute ago! One more time, if I took those one more time, I bet I wouldn't come down that time! Drugs, gimme drugs! Somebody's gotta go deal with the Runorata pushers directly and get me drugs, or Iiiiiiii, AAAAAAAAh, I'll die, this is really gonna kill me, hey, save me, somebody, help me, hey, Edith, Ediiiiith...

Seven hours later, in his bathroom, Roy finally managed to calm down.

He'd stripped naked, and he stood dazed on a floor that was smeared with his vomit. He'd anticipated situations like this and had rented an apartment with a bathroom on purpose. He was really grateful to himself for having made it to that bathroom while he still had some sense left.

On the one hand, this had been his first time taking that kind, so the down hadn't been as bad; on the other, since he regularly took other drugs, he'd probably had a weird reaction. Either way, the things he'd done before now had bounced back up and hit him. From a medical perspective, there might be aftereffects, but after all, it was a new type of drug. Roy didn't know any of the details. All he understood was the tremendous excitement from the instant he'd taken it, and the terror of the down he'd just come through.

He wanted to apologize to Edith. He'd managed to last through the panic on the strength of that one intense thought. The weakness of will it took to succumb to seeking temporary highs and the determination to make it through the subsequent fear: Roy was a member of the odd breed that possessed this strange combination of mental strengths.

As he cleaned himself and the bathroom, he even felt a slight sense of achievement. Now, this time for sure, he'd be able to keep his promise to Edith. He had the feeling something like this had happened before, but that was probably just his imagination.

Pulling shorts and a shirt onto his now-clean body, Roy headed for the living room, humming. *I gotta say, though, I hurt all over. Did I get in a fight while I was high or something? Is it some kind of bad effect from the drug?*

Abruptly, he stopped in his tracks.

What's that bag?

A bag he'd never seen before lay under the table. It was a big leather satchel, and it bulged as if it was stuffed full of something.

He'd seen it somewhere before, but he couldn't remember where. He actually got the feeling he couldn't *afford* to remember where.

The terror he'd thought had subsided returned. Instead of his brain, his heart started to jump loudly.

Fearfully, he went closer, opened the bag, and—

As he remembered everything, Roy's heart very nearly stopped from the shock.

The bag was stuffed to bursting with white packets of powder.

It was the new drug the Runorata Family was spreading around, the stuff he'd just been in thrall to.

Slowly, the Grim Reaper that lived inside him began to swing its great scythe down.

RUNORATA FAMILY

A mansion on the outskirts of Newark, the capital of New Jersey

“And?”

The man who spoke was standing beside an ostentatious desk. He was probably over fifty; his wrinkles were neither deep nor shallow, and he wore intellectual-looking glasses on his dignified face. While there was no emotion to be gleaned from his tone or expression, the men in suits who stood around him all visibly tensed en masse at this single word.

“You’re telling me that not only did someone steal all of the new drug, but you let the thief get away?”

As the middle-aged man continued, everyone in the room gulped.

Then, looking like death-row convicts who’d walked up those thirteen steps, they waited for him—Bartolo Runorata, the boss of their syndicate—to finish.

After a breath that seemed like an eternity, Bartolo slowly closed his eyes and spoke.

“And?”

The big man who came forward to answer the question broke out in a cold sweat. “Right, we’ll mobilize all the men we can spare and find that guy—”

“What I am asking you is...”

Bartolo cut the other man off and quietly went on. “Exactly what benefit is there for me, you, and by extension the entire Family in your reporting every trivial thing to me this way?”

Although his voice was calm, the sharpness in it seemed to seize the hearts of everyone who heard it.

“Gustavo. I told you I was leaving the Manhattan business in your hands, remember? That means the only thing you need to report to me is either good news or bad news... Or what? Are you telling me you’re incompetent enough to judge an *insignificant little situation* like this one as ‘bad news’?”

The man he’d called Gustavo wore an expression that made him look like a frog that had been impaled by a shrike. His big body was

quivering.

“Boss, I’d never...”

“So you’re competent?”

At those words, Gustavo went completely silent.

“I have plans to see my grandchild today. Don’t sully my memories of this day with dull talk.”

On that note, without giving him a reprimand or advice, Bartolo left the room.

The people who remained seemed to be trying to gauge what the others were feeling. All of them wore expressions of mixed unease and relief.

“This ain’t no time to turn cretin, men.”

Gustavo lit a fire under his subordinates; his expression and attitude had changed completely from what they’d been when his boss was present.

“Watch that mugger spread the drugs around for peanuts. They’d laugh us out of town! If that happens, our job in Manhattan might turn into ‘bad news’! Do whatever you have to—just find that punk!”

As far as they were concerned, this had been an enormous blunder.

Some absolute nobody had made off with a bag crammed full of drugs. It hadn’t happened because they’d been particularly careless. The carriers who were driving the car simply hadn’t been able to predict the situation.

They’d never expected a truck to plow into their side at full speed.

The impact had thrown them out of the vehicle, and a young guy had gotten out of the truck and run off with the new product, which was worth six hundred thousand on the market.

The culprit must have taken a big hit from the impact as well, but he’d fled the scene as if he couldn’t feel pain. Naturally, they weren’t able to report the damages, and the incident had been dealt with as a simple hit-and-run.

The truck had been stolen, and they’d gotten word that from the looks of the perpetrator, he was probably a junkie.

However, that district was run by the Gandor Family, and they didn’t deal in drugs at all. The Runoratas knew nothing would turn up there even if they looked, so their investigation from that angle had been lax from the beginning.

Viewed objectively, it was a priceless joke. The ones distributing drugs in that area were the Runoratas themselves. They’d been attacked by a kid who was high on drugs they’d sold. For dealers, it was a huge, unprecedented screwup of the absolute rock-bottom lowest order, the sort of spectacular error that would probably never be seen again.

“Just take back the goods. As long as you do that, I don’t care if you murder him or what—”

“I...can’t...have...that.”

Behind him, Gustavo heard an eerie groan. When he hastily turned around, Begg was sitting in a corner; apparently, he’d gotten into the room at some point. Even though there were lots of empty chairs, he was sitting right on the floor.

“Begg, huh? Don’t spook me like that! ...And whaddaya mean, you can’t have that?”

“I...want to...ask...him...what he...thought. If...someone...did something...that reckless...while...on my drugs, I...absolutely...want...to...hear his...story. I...may...use him...as a test...subject...for my...new...drugs. So...if...you can, take...him...alive.”

“Of all the moronic—”

Involuntarily, Gustavo began to yell at him, but he kept the rest of the words locked in his throat. He didn’t know much about Begg, but when he’d joined this organization, the guy had already been there. He had to be one of the oldest members, but Gustavo didn’t even know his real age. At a glance, he looked to be around thirty, but it had been eight years since Gustavo became part of the syndicate, and in that time, Begg didn’t seem to have aged at all.

It was likely that his body had gone strange places due to the effect of some drug. Instead of being jealous of his youth, the people around him treated him very cautiously and did their best not to talk about it.

“—Don’t ask for too much, all right? We gave you a terrific refinery, remember? Don’t pester us for more.”

“Hmm. You...got one...for me? You...only...took over...a cocaine factory...that...someone...else...had...been...running... Along... with...its...cover...business. His...name...was...Genoard, wasn’t...it? The...previous...owner.”

There was clear irony in the halting words.

“‘Took it over’? Hey, don’t say that. The company had lost its manager, and we just shored it up, that’s all. From both the front and from the back, see.”

“‘Lost,’ hmm? B-by...throwing...himself...into...N-Newark...Bay, car...and...all? What...violence. That’s...s-several...times...r-rougher...than...Bartolo’s...m-methods.”

“...You’re a member of this Family, too. Why don’t you watch your mouth a little?”

Behind his blank expression, Gustavo was clamping down rage. In response, Begg’s smile was clearly scornful. Before long, as if he’d tired of it, the smile disappeared, and Begg began to leave the room as though nothing had happened. As he left, he called attention to a

certain treaty.

“List...en. I told...you...before: B-be...careful...not to...meddle...with the...Martillo Family. That’s...my condition...for...cooperating...with you, Gustavo.”

Once he’d said this, Begg disappeared beyond the door without a sound.

“Hunh. For a guy who’s useless for anything that ain’t drugs, he’s pretty full of himself... Bastard!”

Spitting out that parting shot, Gustavo turned back to the men who were still in the room.

“Listen up. We’re grabbing territory from the little outfits, starting with the Gandors. At the same time, we’re putting down roots for the drug business. That’s our job in Manhattan. Another job nobody asked for got piled on top of that, but it don’t change what we’ll be doing. Crush anyone who gets in our way. If they’re weak, crush ’em even if they’re not in the way. There’s no need to warn them or negotiate. That stuff’s for equals. We just have to flex our power in front of ’em, get me? Fast and thorough, so that by the time they see it, it’s too late —”

Talking as though he’d become the boss of a syndicate, Gustavo loudly declared their victory. It was as if the self he’d shown Bartolo mere moments ago had never existed in the first place.

“This age is ours, period. I won’t let that thieving punk and the puny playtime mafia exist in our world. Crush ’em, grind ’em down until there’s nothing left, erase them completely from the past, present, and future. That’s our duty.”



PURCHASE

1931 Late December Somewhere in Chinatown

In a corner of Manhattan, a small building stood in an unobtrusive location.

A sign that seemed to have been tacked on as an afterthought held the name “Daily Days.”

The *Daily Days*, or “DD,” was a weak little newspaper that slipped through the gaps in the fierce circulation battle that was unfolding between the *New York Times* and the *New York Tribune*.

However, after all, newspaper publishing was merely its public front. Viewed as a whole, its shadow face—that of an information brokerage—brought in far more revenue.

Ordinarily, it would have been inconceivable for an information brokerage to base itself in a single location. Such business was far more suited to the environment presented in movies and books: that of notes stealthily passed in back alleys and the corners of bars. In the first place, once an information broker’s whereabouts were known, there was no telling when they’d be bumped off.

It was one thing for newspaper reporters and police officers to dabble in that line of work for pocket money, but this was a business—rare even in this industry—that used it as a main trade, like a detective agency.

This little building in a corner of Chinatown was the headquarters for the *Daily Days*, which included their editorial department. Most of the employees were Chinese, but there were people of a few other ethnicities as well, and their newspaper was published in three editions, each in a different language: Chinese, English, and Italian.

Crushing the old newspapers that lay in the road underfoot, several men entered the building.

At first glance, the inside of the building looked like some sort of government office. The atmosphere was noisy and chaotic, and people who seemed to be newspaper reporters and editorial staff were bustling around the room.

Initially, the only people they saw were Asian, and the men scowled openly. At that, one Caucasian individual approached them

from the depths of the room.

Apparently, although they were very close to the border of another district, they hadn't expected to see a white guy working in Chinatown. For a moment, the men looked taken aback as they watched the employee walk toward them in silence.

When there was a single desk between them, the white-skinned fellow stopped and spoke to the men, who still looked dazed.

"Welcome. What brings you here today?"

The words that came out of the man's mouth were in perfectly ordinary English, albeit with a New York accent.

"Did you want to request a regular subscription? Ah, excuse me: My name is Nicholas. I'm the copy editor for the English edition."

Nicholas introduced himself smoothly. In response, one of the men in coats arrogantly stated their business:

"We ain't interested in your lousy rag. We're here for information, that's all."

Nicholas looked just a little saddened by the man's extremely rude speech.

"We flatter ourselves that it's a pretty interesting paper... Well? What sort of information were you looking for?"

"You know that accident on Mulberry Street yesterday?"

Nicholas answered the question by giving a fluent outline of events:

"You mean the collision between a passenger car and a truck that occurred after one o'clock yesterday afternoon? Well, it would be more accurate to call that an 'incident' instead of an 'accident.' It was a completely unilateral hit-and-run on the part of the truck. There were two victims, Sam Buscetta and Anselmo Jonell; the assailant, a man with a distinctive scar on his neck, is still on the run—correct?"

At the wave of information he'd suddenly reeled off, the men looked at one another. What Nicholas had just told them was something only a handful of people—the police and the men directly involved—knew at this point.

As the men turned astonished eyes upon him, Nicholas kept speaking, briskly:

"The two victims are members of the Runorata Family, a mafia organization headquartered in Newark—in other words, your friends."

At these words, spoken casually, all three men froze.

They hadn't given their names yet; they hadn't intended to do so at all. It was as if this pale man had seen through them, knew everything about who they really were...

However, they couldn't afford to get flustered here. The man had probably guessed who they were from their appearance and the situation and had just happened to be right. If they acted upset now,

they'd play right into his hands.

"I see. If you know all that, then I bet you know why we're here." He was bluffing, but his palms were already beginning to sweat. "We want to know where to find the guy with the scarred-up neck. Any info you've got, even little stuff—"

"Scottish immigrant. Aged twenty-two." Nicholas spoke simply, interrupting the man.

"...What?"

"Anything more than that will cost you."

The matter had been brought up so abruptly that the men hadn't realized the "transaction" had already begun.

"The price of the information is five hundred dollars in cash. In addition, we'd like you to provide us with an item of information in return."

"Eh? Information?"

"Well, you see, to put it bluntly—we want to know what got stolen. Don't pretend you don't know what I mean. We got a proper report of everything, including the fact that a black leather bag was carried off."

Still smiling breezily, Nicholas explained with terrifying ease.

"You seriously think we could tell you that?"

"In that case, the deal is off."

"...Lemme ask you something. Say we did tell you, and then the police came to you and asked for that info. Would you give it to them?"

"Of course. We're running a business here."

The man's veins, which had begun to twitch, swelled up so fast they seemed in danger of bursting.

"Don't gimme that bullshit! You got a death wish or something?!"

As the men raged, every eye in the editorial department went to them in unison.

"Geh?!"

And as the vitriolic customers registered a certain fact, they quickly shifted to confusion:

All of the Asian journalists were expressionless, and every one of them held a pistol. The muzzle of every gun was trained on the group of men, and a semicircular net had formed around them in the blink of an eye. At first glance, it looked disorderly, but in fact, all the lines of fire neatly avoided Nicholas.

A closer look revealed that the many desks and documents were in perfect position to provide cover for the others, while the gangsters' group had nothing to hide behind.

The resulting formation was like a small handful of soldiers surrounded by countless trenches and ramparts.

In an instant, the visitors' blood ran cold. However, when Nicholas raised a hand, the guns all disappeared back into the reporters' jackets.

"I'm sorry about that. This business tends to get rather dangerous, you see."

With that comment, he ducked his head in casual apology, then resumed speaking as though nothing had happened.

"Well, just calm down and listen. Even if we did give that information to the police, it wouldn't be proof. All you need to do is think about destroying the evidence at your leisure."

Mixing in unreasonable logic, Nicholas slowly began to relate a portion of his information brokerage's system.

"You may think your superiors will punish you, but there's no need to worry about that. It's our duty to keep information sources secret, and we're very thorough about it... Although you'll just have to trust me on that. Even if the Runorata Family were to sustain some sort of loss, you saw nothing, and you were never here. That's all you'll need to say."

"The man's name is Roy Maddock. His address is—"

After a little hesitation, the men had reluctantly agreed to the conditions.

After they'd heard the outline of the affair from the information broker, they provided information in return. However...

"The bag had money in it. Protection money from our customers."

Feeling that there was no need to tell the truth over something this petty, the men had decided to tell a likely-sounding lie. They'd made up a harmless story, thinking that there was no way to see through it.

On hearing that, Nicholas gave a vaguely disappointed smile.

"If you're going to lie, make it slightly more entertaining, would you? Good lies have value as information all on their own, but what you just said really isn't worth..."

The men began to protest, but Nicholas shook his head and kept talking.

"The Runorata territory isn't down that road, and in any case, your collection day is at the beginning of the month. It's nowhere near the time for protection money. Put a little thought into the fib before you tell it, all right?"

When he saw that the other men could no longer argue, Nicholas hit them with a rapid-fire volley of words.

"Put bluntly, it's drugs, isn't it? The new drugs that have been turning up on the Gandors' turf lately. That's what you were transporting, isn't it? Give me a yes or a no in the next five seconds,

four-three-two-one—”

Swept along by his momentum, one of the men nodded involuntarily.

That was enough. On seeing it, Nicholas made one brief comment, then returned to his desk.

“Thank you for your business.”



“Missy Eve, dis here’s da spot, the infahmation brohka where my childhooD pal woiks.”

As she spoke, the woman began to take Eve into a certain building.

“It’s a newspaper?”

This was Eve’s first time in the big city, and she seemed nervous; she swallowed, and her expression was uneasy.

Led by Samantha, they’d arrived at a small newspaper in Chinatown. The building was a patchwork of concrete and brick, and it was beginning to look a little rickety in places. Its sign held the shabby words *Daily Days*.

They’d reached the family’s second residence in New York, but when it came to the question of how to find Dallas, Eve and the others were stumped from the very beginning.

After all, when it came right down to it, no one in the family had known anything about her brother’s personal connections or how he earned money.

Just when Eve had nearly lost heart, Samantha had suddenly let out an exclamation, then said:

“Missy Eve! When thar’s somethin’ ya dunno, you’d best git yerself to an information broker. Let’s try one a’ them!”

“Who would go to such a disreputable... An information broker? Do you intend to bring the young mistress into contact with those ruffians?!”

“Well, land sakes, Benjahmin. If’n you talk smack ’bout mah ol’ buddy, you’ll get my dander up, right and proper.”

“Oh, hush. As if we could trust information from a fellow like your old friend, someone we may very well not be able to understand! And my name is pronounced ‘Ben-yah -min’! How many times must I say it before it sinks in?! When you speak my name, don’t inflict the English pronunciation on it!”

Her butler, Benjamin, was, as stated, very much against the idea.

However, in the end, they’d had nothing else to rely on, and so

they'd come here...

"What, it's a newspaper, is it? Hmm. In that case, miss, we may be able to trust them to a certain degree."

Her butler, who'd completely regained his composure, respectfully opened the door for his mistress.

Eve went through the door first. Then the butler let go of the door, intending to pass through himself—only to be shoved by Samantha and topple over in grand style.

"T-treat me as a vaudeville performer, would you!" Grumbling, he went through the door last and found himself in the midst of a disorderly scene, his ears struck by a din woven from unfamiliar words. To Eve, who'd never had any contact with ordinary work sites, the kaleidoscopic view was more than enough to give her culture shock.

"Oh, my..."

"Miss?"

When her butler spoke, Eve came back to herself with a jolt.

"Oh... They look terribly busy. They can't possibly have time to spend on us, can they?"

Speaking with more politeness than was necessary, Eve looked around uneasily.

As if to reassure her, Samantha laid a plump palm on her shoulder.

"There ain't nada to fret yoself 'bout. I jes' jawed on th'ameche wid Elean a tick ago."

"I beg your pardon?"

The butler, not understanding Samantha's words, was confused. Eve whispered in his ear:

"There's no need to worry. I talked with Elean on the telephone a little while ago'...she says."

Embarrassed at having made his own mistress interpret for his benefit, the butler grabbed a man who looked as if he might understand English and began explaining the situation to him.

On hearing their circumstances, the man—who introduced himself as Nicholas—went up a flight of stairs to the second floor.

After a short while he returned, accompanied by an eccentric-looking man. Like Samantha, the man was black, but his clothes were clearly Chinese formal wear, a coal-black men's outfit.

This new man occasionally spoke with the Asians he passed, and when he did, it was in extremely fluent Chinese. He also wore sunglasses with a sharp design, which made him look even sketchier.

When the man saw Samantha, he struck a dramatic welcoming pose, greeting his old friend in the local dialect.

“Saaaamantha! It’s been forever, really forever! Just how many years has it been since we last saw each other?! Marvelous! Today is bound to be a marvelous day! I find myself compelled to pray that the day proves marvelous for me, for you, and for every soul in this city!”

Maintaining an energy level that was two or three notches higher than that of the average person, he hugged his old friend tightly. However, the length of his arms was such that, even stretching them as far as they’d go, he just barely managed to touch his fingertips together behind Samantha’s back. As they held this unbalanced embrace, the pair basked in the delight of their reunion.

“Well now, come, come, we have a lot to catch up on, but we’ll save that for later. For now, let’s hear your mistress’s request, shall we? Technically, I’m supposed to take five hundred dollars and more information in return, but since she’s *your* mistress, Samantha, it’s on the house this time, with my compliments!”

The trio was shown into what appeared to be a reception room. Eve and Samantha sat on the sofa, but the butler stayed standing by the door, neatly, his posture betraying neither dignity nor subservience.

Watching the butler as if the sight of him was entertaining, the Chinese black guy—Elean Duga—began talking to Eve.

“All right, let’s see, hmm. Miss Eve Genoard, if I recall correctly, you wanted us to look for a Mr. Dallas Genoard, who’s been missing for a year. I have my people checking through the information right now. Once they’ve got it together, they have orders to bring it here, so somebody should show up aaaany minute. No, I mean it. It’ll be soon, I tell you, soon! By the way, you said this was your big brother? I’m sure we’ll find him safe and sound! Don’t worry; there’s nothing in this town we don’t know. We just might uncover your brother’s current whereabouts lickety-split, and—”

Elean’s monologue was interrupted by a knock that echoed in the reception room.

“Ah, it looks like they’re here.”

Swiftly, the butler opened the door, and an Asian entered with a bundle of documents.

The fact that the new man’s face was expressionless worried Eve, but Elean was glancing through the documents, and she decided to wait for his reaction.

At first, Elean hummed as he skimmed the documents, but then, abruptly, he shot up from his chair and walked over to the window, waving his arms in an exaggerated fashion.

The sun was beginning to set, deepening the colors of the beautiful redbrick buildings.

As he gazed out at the view, Elean slowly began to speak.

“Right. It’s always like that. People have told me I tend to get carried away for many, many years. I told myself that being called thoughtless was a sort of compliment; I’ve fooled myself that way all this time. But, you see, if you reword that a bit, it just means a fellow who can’t read the atmosphere, doesn’t it? I always thought, *I’m not going to live like this anymore*, but in the end, I haven’t been able to change. Manic states are a bit like drugs, you know. Once you’ve had a taste, you just want to stay that way forever and ever.”

At first it was impossible to tell what he was talking about, but he seemed to be trying to change the subject.

“U-um, please, tell me! My brother—where is Dallas?!”

Growing excited, Eve stood up in spite of herself, but even the butler didn’t reproach her for it.

In sharp contrast to Eve and the others, who’d gotten worked up, the information broker’s mood grew more and more listless.

“Oh, I’m sorry, really. I’m sorry. What was that business about ‘praying that the day proves to be marvelous,’ anyway...? As things stand, I might as well be the harbinger of misfortune, an utter bastard who feasts on others’ misery and rejoices all by himself. No practical information broker should ever have told you—and so easily—that we were sure to find him safe and sound. I’m terribly sorry to have given you false hope, only to push you off the edge like this; ah, ah, how I rue my helplessness, I—”

“Wouldja quit dinkin’ around and use ya woids?!”

When Samantha shook Elean and bellowed at him, he finally told them the bottom line.

“I think it’s criminal to put this sort of thing in a roundabout way. Therefore, I’ll just say it straight out.”

Elean had completely slipped into depression, and his lips delivered the bad news:

“Your brother, Dallas Genoard. He’s on the bottom of the river. Under the deep, dark, cold waters of the Hudson, in a drum can, in the company of two of his friends.”

At that plainspoken answer, Eve’s heart had frozen instantly.

She was struck by the illusion that time had stopped. The only thing in the world that still made noise was the ferocious beating of her heart.

As Eve kept her emotions from crumbling, she desperately squeezed air from the depths of her lungs:

“Is... Is that true?”

“Unfortunately, there doesn’t seem to be any doubt about it. We know who did it, too. They’re a small outfit. The Gandor Family...”

She didn't really remember what happened after that.

The next thing she knew, Eve was gripping a knife and fork.

She hadn't registered anything since that moment, and apparently, while her mind was elsewhere, they'd returned to the second residence. At a corner of the vast table, Samantha had already finished eating. Benjamin was simply standing quietly at Eve's side. It was likely that he hadn't eaten yet.

For a short while, Eve stayed that way, looking down. Before long, though, she spoke, as if she'd made up her mind.

"Benjamin...Samantha. I'm truly sorry about that."

At those words, her servants simultaneously stared at her.

"Miss! Miss, there isn't the slightest reason for you to apologize to the likes of us! Never mind that, is something wrong? Are you feeling unwell?"

"Yeah, y'need to eat up an' make yahself nice an' strong."

"Thank...you."

She gave a weak smile. On seeing this, Samantha hollered, attempting to cheer her up:

"Don't you pay it no mind, honey! Even infermaytion brokuhs git handed bum intel a'times."

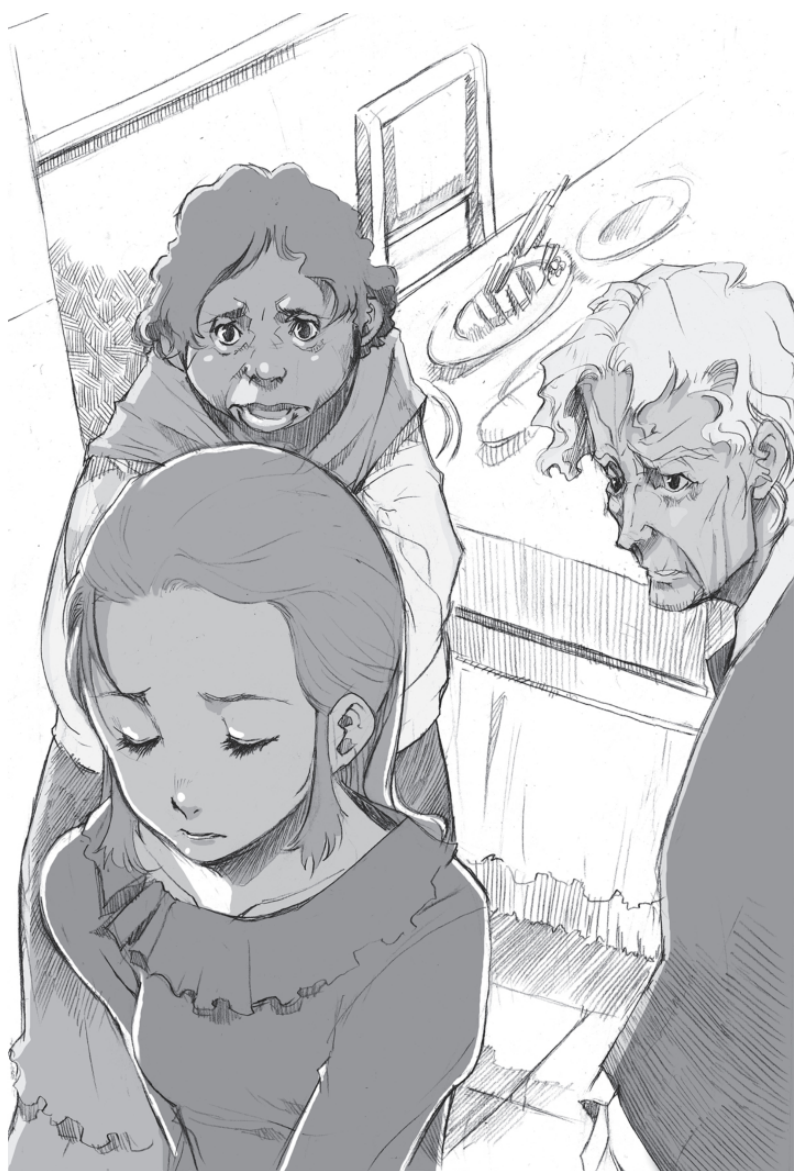
"She's absolutely right! You mustn't let anything said by such dubious individuals lead you astray, miss!"

The two of them tried desperately to encourage her, but Eve only smiled sadly.

"Thank you. I'm a little tired today, so if you'll excuse me, I think I'll go to bed early."

Murmuring words far too familiar to say to one's servants, Eve quietly left the dining room, still smiling faintly.

The meal she hadn't touched sat on the table, waiting to grow stone cold.



To be honest, she'd already known. She'd thought that might be the case.

Almost no one who disappeared in Manhattan ended up returning home safe and sound.

She'd known that. And yet. What on earth had she been expecting?

She'd held a faint hope that another miracle might occur.

Even though she'd already used up her one life-changing wish on that earlier occasion.

Oh, what a foolish thing she'd done.

There hadn't been any need to hope for a miracle.

If she'd had just a little more courage, couldn't she have stopped Dallas easily?

She'd only prayed in an attempt to run from the effort and the fear.

Oh... When Father and Jeffrey died...that's when I really wanted a miracle. Of course I know the dead can't be revived. That's why, at least—at the very least—if Dallas was still all right...

But no miracle had occurred.

If there was such a thing as a wish of a lifetime, and if it was something that really existed...then she'd already used up hers.

That meant she should have known this would happen. She'd thought she'd steeled herself for it. And yet.

Why was she so terribly sad?

I didn't even like Dallas. He was rough, a coward; he didn't have a shred of moral sense. People always, always, always hated him, and he always, always, always hated them, too.

Still, all she could think of was her memory of the last time she'd seen him.

How kind his face had been when he'd taught her billiards, the day after God's burglar-messengers had come.

Oh why, why was he nice only to me? If he'd just hated me the way he hated everyone else...

Quite abruptly, Eve was afraid of herself. She noticed her own selfishness, was completely appalled by it, and grew hopelessly mortified and sad.

Immediately, tears welled up and overflowed, and she sobbed quietly as her pillow grew damp.

Is it all right to do nothing but cry? Will that be enough to let you forget someday? You've been confronted with the deaths of your father and two older brothers, and all you can do is cry? The best you can do is cling to something and keep praying, the way you did a year ago?

If there was the faintest possibility, then she mustn't give up.

This just wouldn't do. What she needed to do now...was make amends to her brother.



As Eve and the others left the *Daily Days* newspaper offices, a man entered, as if taking their place.

There was a perennially entertained smile on his face. In contrast to Nicholas, who came off as bracing, this man's smile was unpleasant, as if it were appraising something about the other person.

When the man opened the door to the editorial department, the sight of Nicholas lending Elean his shoulder jumped out at him.

"Ah, Henry, are you back? Elean got a little depressed again. It's time for me to clock out, so you take over here."

"Well, well. Thank you ever so much for your diligent service." With an attitude that was superficially polite but actually quite rude, the man called Henry watched the two of them go. "Rest assured, you may leave everything to me. I believe it might be best if the two of you shared a leisurely drink."

"...I don't feel good about letting you field customers, but both the president and the vice president are out. Dammit."

Nicholas, sounding troubled, shook his head as he left. Elean departed with him.

Henry cheerfully watched them go and gave a little chuckle.

"Now, then. I haven't dealt with customers in quite some time. I do hope someone I'll be able to enjoy will stop by."

As it turned out, his wish was granted immediately.

A man whose face was blatantly hidden by a cap, a muffler, and dark glasses came in, with a glaringly suspicious attitude.

The Asian employees in the editorial department stopped working for a moment, their hands reaching for their desk drawers or jacket pockets.

At that, with no hesitation whatsoever, the customer spoke to them. He addressed the man at the reception desk in Chinese that, while not quite fluent, had seen significant use: "I have a complicated matter to discuss. Does anyone here speak English?"

Just then, having finished preparing for work, Henry appeared.

Warping his disagreeable smile even further, he spoke, sounding terribly cheerful and amused.

"If I'll suffice, I can listen to your story."



Alveare—"the Beehive"—was a speakeasy run by the Martillo Family.

Here, in the space in the back of a honey shop, Nicholas and Elean were drinking liquor sweetened with honey. The décor in the spacious establishment was elegant, and the atmosphere made it feel more like an upscale restaurant than a bar.

"Think Henry's going to be okay?" Nicholas wondered, swirling his drink.

"At the very least, he'll be much better than I am," Elean lamented energetically. "Ahh, I'm worthless. Worthless, worthless, worthless, worthless. What's worthless, you ask? *Everything* is worthless."

"Yeah, you're definitely worthless," Nicholas concurred lackadaisically. "But don't let it get to you. You just couldn't keep quiet about it and got her hopes up for nothing. So, look, next time, just keep your emotions reined in tighter. And I've said that a million times already."

As he ate the food the girl in the cheongsam had brought over, Elean nodded silently.

Then, as if he'd remembered something, he looked up.

"Listen, though. There *is* something that's been bothering me."

"What?" Nicholas asked.

"It's about that Dallas fellow. Apparently, there's some information about him that's being kept top secret."

"Top secret?"

Even among the *Daily Days* newspaper staff, only the president and vice president were allowed access to information deemed to be top secret. It was possible that no such documents existed in the first place. There were rumors that all of it was kept exclusively inside the minds of the president and vice president, but no one knew for sure.

"Dallas was just a thug, wasn't he? Top secret, for him...? Oh, though—hang on a tick." At this, Nicholas broke off for a moment to drain the contents of his glass. "They say it was the Gandors who scratched Dallas, right? In that case, it's probably *that*. Something to do with immortals."

"Oh...I see. Yes, you're right."

Immortals. Elean accepted this unrealistic word, which had appeared out of the blue, with no questions whatsoever.

To these two, immortals were humans whose existence was solid fact. They'd actually met them in person.

Including, for example, the waitress who'd just brought them their food.

However, they had only fragmentary information on the subject.

Their knowledge that two hundred years ago, a group of alchemists had become immortal on a ship bound for this continent was a fact. They were aware of restrictions on that immortality and

that immortals couldn't use false names with each other. Immortals weren't able to use false names in public situations, either. They knew immortals could "eat" each other through their right hands.

...And the fact that, in a certain incident one year ago, several people who lived in this town had become immortal. The Martillo Family executives, the waitress, the proprietress of the honey shop... and the three brothers who acted as the Gandor triumvirate.

Some versions of the story said there were a few others as well. However, Nicholas and Elean didn't even know their names, although it was likely that the president's group had some sort of information on them.

"Well, if we hadn't heard it straight from the president, we wouldn't have believed it either."

"You got that right."

Their conversation ran out there, and they went on quietly scarfing down their food.

At that point, a new guest came in.

It was a woman, about twenty years old, and she was holding a big black leather bag.

The pair from the information brokerage recognized her immediately.

"Speak of the devil. That girl's a waitress at the Gandors' speakeasy, isn't she?"

"Yeah, you're right. Wasn't her name Edith or something?"

There was one other thing that concerned Nicholas. He hadn't mentioned it to the Runorata men who'd come in that afternoon, but if he recalled correctly, she was Roy Maddock's—the drug snatcher's—sweetheart.

And that leather bag she was holding...

Feeling something approaching certainty, Nicholas decided to watch what she did.

"Oh, welcome! Edith, you haven't been to this place in ages!"

"Hi, Lia. You're looking as chipper as ever."

Edith exchanged greetings with her cheongsam-clad friend, but her expression seemed a little strained.

Noticing this, Lia Lin-Shan came over to speak to her, looking worried. There weren't many customers in the speakeasy yet, and she appeared to have time on her hands.

"What's wrong? You look sort of funny."

"No, uh... Listen, um, actually, I have a favor to ask..."

Mumbling guiltily, Edith held out the black bag.

"It's about this bag. Could you hold on to it for me for a little while?"

Turn the clock back to that evening.

“And I am *asking* you, exactly *why* would you bring a thing like that to my place?!”

In the rented apartment where Edith lived, an uproar had broken out over a certain bag.

“Anyway, even if you were high, why in the world would you do a half-witted thing like that?!”

“Uh, how should I put this...? Look, it’s like, you know how you can’t get time back once it’s gone? There’s nothing to do about stuff once it’s done. See? You forget time once it’s past, and I think we should probably forget about *how* stuff happened and just focus on the results. For now, see, this thing happened, and we need to do something about it.”

There was no telling what had happened to the spirit he’d had yesterday. Roy had completely reverted to a timid young fellow, and he kept on making hesitant excuses to Edith, who was glaring at him.

“Honestly! What’s wrong with you, anyway?! When you’re on drugs, you get carried away and say embarrassing things like ‘I was one with the world’ without any trouble at all, but now...!”

“See, I mess with drugs because I want to change that part of me. Once people experience pleasure like that, it’s hard for them to swear it off, especially if they’re weak, like me...”

“If you’re able to analyze yourself calmly, then don’t mess with drugs in the first place! Idiot!”

After that, Edith harangued Roy for close to an hour. During that hour, the word *idiot* was mentioned more than three hundred times.

Running out of insults and steam, Edith heaved a great sigh.

“Still, it looks like you haven’t touched the contents of this bag. That’s a relief.”

“Honestly...I wanted to shoot up so bad I couldn’t stand it. It was just, if I took any of that, the stuff the Runorata goons would do to me... I-I was scared. Scared of what they’d do. I know how the Runorata fellas work...”

“In other words, you stopped yourself because you were afraid. I thought it was probably something like that... Still, even though you’re scared of coming down, you always shoot up without stressing about it, so I’m proud of you for holding back this time. Does this mean you’re scared of dying, Roy? ...Even though drugs are all you do?”

Edith asked the question as if she was mystified. As Roy answered

her, his shoulders were trembling.

“Yeah, I’m scared. From what I hear, their methods are dirty—especially that Gustavo guy. He doesn’t issue warnings or nothing; he just goes around killing anyone who’s even remotely involved, whether they’re part of the underworld or not. If I’m the one dying, I don’t mind. But, but—”

Roy was timid, and he wasn’t able to get the rest of the sentence out.

As if she’d realized what he actually meant, Edith’s face suddenly grew calm, and she hugged Roy’s quaking shoulders.

“I’m sorry. Thank you.”

After murmuring those few short words, Edith took the bag and stood up.

“It took time, but you did keep that promise. In that case, it’s my turn to promise. I promise I won’t let you die. I’ll protect you, both from the Gandors and from the Runorata men.”

With that, she flung open the door to the room, heavy bag in hand.

“Wh-where are you going?”

“For now, I think this bag could be our trump card. If we keep it with us, though, they’ll be able to take it back easily, and if they catch us with it, we’re finished. For the moment, I think I’ll leave it with a friend I can trust.”

“What?! You can’t! You’ll be pulling them into this, too!”

“It’s fine. The territories the Runoratas are messing with all belong to small outfits, but there’s one where they haven’t been spreading their drugs around. Just one. I’m going to ask a friend in that one.”



“...And that’s why... I do feel bad about this, but... I’m sorry!”

“If you’re just going to apologize, you probably shouldn’t ask in the first place.”

In a corner of Alveare, Edith and Lia were talking in whispers.

“You’re right,” Edith fretted. “I’m sorry. I knew I shouldn’t...”

“But okay. I’ll hang on to it for you.”

“Huh?”

Lia had agreed so easily that Edith’s eyes went round.

“You really like Roy, don’t you, Edith?”

Lia spoke as if she were teasing her. In contrast, Edith’s voice was uneasy—

“Y-you’re sure? Um, if possible, I don’t want the Martillos to find out about it, either. It sounds as though everyone here is good friends with Mr. Keith and Mr. Luck.”

“We aren’t that chummy when I’m working, so I think it’ll be okay. It’s fine. Only, my room doesn’t have a lock, so I’ll give this to somebody I trust.”

At those words, she felt a little bewildered, but in matters like these, it was probably safer to have double or triple layers.

“All right,” Edith said, pumping herself up. “If you trust this person, Lia, I’ll trust them, too. Okay, then: Thank you so much!”

As they watched Edith go, Nicholas and Elean, who’d been listening the whole time, drew deep breaths.

The conversation had been held at a volume that wouldn’t have been possible to pick up ordinarily, but these two were used to the din of the editorial department, and they’d just barely managed to make it out.

“Well, now. We’ve just gotten our hands on some pretty sensitive information. What should we do with it?”

As he answered the English copy editor’s question, the Chinese copy editor’s eyes sparkled.

“First off, we’ll just have to report it to the president tomorrow, won’t we? If this fascinating information proves useful, we’ll have done good for the world and for mankind, and we won’t be utterly worthless anymore!”

“What’s this ‘we’ business? Are you calling me utterly worthless, too?”

Feeling mildly disgusted by Elean’s abrupt recovery from his depression, Nicholas gazed into space and knocked back the contents of his glass.

“Mind you, I’m not terribly fond of being directly involved with sensitive information...”



“Yes, I see. I understand what you’re driving at.”

At the same time, in the newspaper offices, Roy and Henry were facing each other.

“In other words, what you’ve just said may be summarized as follows: You want to know the Runoratas’ weakness. Correct?”

“Yeah, th-that’s right. I was wondering if they had some sort of weak point big enough to keep them from taking shots at me or my friend after we hand over the drugs.”

As his palms grew slick with sweat, Roy related the details of the incident.

In response, Henry maintained his amused smile and his

hypocritically courteous attitude.

“Well, a confession directly from you is valuable information in and of itself, so that will do nicely. The problem is the fee. For information as important as this, we’ll require five thousand dollars at the very least.”

“F-five thousand dollars?!”

Roy, who’d just blown all his money on drugs, had absolutely no hope of squeezing out a sum like that. Add the recession on top of it, and there weren’t many people who could pay such an enormous amount at a moment’s notice, even if they weren’t Roy.

“However.”

Henry’s smile grew even more entertained, and he proposed a compromise.

“There is a way. This isn’t a formal transaction, and as a company, we are unable to guarantee this information, but—”

Rising from his chair in the reception room, Henry put his face right up close to Roy’s.

“Why don’t we say that I’m speaking not as a company employee, but as an individual—to myself, and that you merely overheard?”

“I-is that okay?”

Looking at Roy, whose eyes were shining, Henry nodded, seemingly satisfied.

“Have you heard of an affluent gentleman named Genoard?”

Roy shook his head.

“He was a New Jersey businessman who was active in the textiles industry, but that was merely his public face. In the shadows, he managed a factory at which he refined and commercialized cocaine and cannabis, from which he then profited by delivering it to the Runorata Family. In other words, over generations—although, really, this was only the second generation—the Genoard family had established themselves in underworld society as drug lords.”

At the abrupt introduction of this topic, in spite of himself, Roy’s eyes went wide. After all, it wasn’t as if this had nothing to do with him: Up until a short while ago, he’d been a patron, not of the current unregulated new drugs, but of these existing products.

“That said, the first-generation administrator died, and his son and one of his grandsons took over the business. A little while after that, their relationship with the Runoratas, and particularly with Gustavo, seems to have soured. I expect there was some sort of unpleasantness regarding finances.

“—And then they sent the head of the family and his oldest son to join the choir invisible, making it look like an accident, and all the factories that were formerly managed by the Genoards are now

managed by Runorata members. They seem to have bought up or threatened the directors of the public business and absorbed it as well."

Once he'd heard the whole story, Roy spoke up, sounding excited.

"Th-then, if I use that information—!"

"Don't be hasty, please. As things stand, you have no proof. Almost all the individuals who could serve as witnesses are in the hands of your opponents."

"Then it's pointless!"

"That said, there is one person who may be a possibility. Not only that, but they are currently here, in Manhattan."

"Ah?"

"Whether this person actually knows anything is of no consequence. The important thing is that, if the mere possibility exists, they can be used as a trump card against the Runorata... Provided you secure the individual, that is."

Henry's smile was completely warped, as if he were a devil sneering at human misfortune.

"I suggest you use that person as a shield, leave town with your loved one, and then open your negotiations... In order to prevent them from making an attempt on your companion, you see. Depending on the situation, you may end up with an even greater return. Afterward, once the storm has blown over, you need only release the individual, and that will be the end of the matter. One person will have been held captive, but there will be no casualties. A fine idea, don't you think?"

Charmed by that smile, Roy gazed back at Henry with eyes full of determination.

Slowly, lips that had a wicked smile plastered across them spoke the individual's name...

"She's the grandchild of the first head of the Genoards, the family's youngest daughter: Eve Genoard."



At the same time The Gandor Family office

In an alley a short distance from Mulberry Street, there was a small jazz hall. The basement of that jazz hall included an area that was just as spacious as the aboveground floors. This was the office of the Gandor Family syndicate, and it served its purpose as the center of the organization with dignity.

“So? What happened to the idiot?”

In a small reception room, separated by a wall from the hall where their men were gathered, the three bosses were taking it easy.

“I left him to the torture fiend, Tick... Although it’s anyone’s guess whether he has the nerves to feel pain anymore.”

The question had come from Berga, the big man and middle brother; Luck, the youngest, gave the unsettling answer in an indifferent voice.

“.....”

As usual, Keith, the oldest, was silent. He was fiddling with a deck of cards, all by himself.

Just then, there was a knock at the door, and a lazy voice rang out:

“Scuuuse me. It’s Tick.”

“Ah, Tick. Come in.”

In response to that voice, the door opened, and a young man poked his head in. He was an agreeable-looking fellow who had the air of a florist about him.

Except for one thing: the pairs of scissors he held, one in each hand.

Although they weren’t liquid and dripping, a large quantity of red stains clung to them, from the blades all the way to the handles.

“No, it’s no good, absolutely no good at aall. He’s fried himself with dope, and he doesn’t have a shred of sense left.”

Eyes beaming, he fluttered his hands about to illustrate the concept.

Luck had anticipated this, and his only reaction was a light sigh.

“If it’s okay to take another month, once we get the drugs out of his system, I could try agaaain.”

“No, don’t bother. There’s no need to get rid of him; just drop him in front of a police station tonight, if you would.”

“Yesss, sir.”

With an ingenuous, childlike smile, the man called Tick left, snipping the air with his scissors as he went.

“You sure?” Berga asked. “That’s the guy who carved your throat for you.”

Luck shook his head. His expression was tired.

“It doesn’t matter. I assume someone put him up to it, but it’s likely that they just sent a junkie who’d gotten to be too much for them to handle. I expect they told him, ‘Kill that man and we’ll give you drugs,’ or something of the sort.”

As he spoke, Luck had a thought:

Ah, there it is again.

Lately, he got the feeling he’d become really apathetic. Even he

could tell: Compared with before—more than a year ago—his sensibilities had grown ridiculously lax. There was absolutely no doubt that his former self would have sent that junkie to the afterlife. Or rather, even before that, that he would have been dead himself.

However, at this point, it didn't seem necessary. This was partly because one dope addict going on a rampage wouldn't affect the syndicate's reputation in the least, but more than anything, he just didn't feel that angry.

It was obvious what had made him this way: the incident that had occurred in this city a year ago, the one that had revolved around the liquor of immortality. He'd gotten pulled into it and had ended up with an indestructible body.

"Kill or be killed." That was an unwritten law in the underworld, but at this point, he could no longer be killed. To hell with unwritten laws.

Do humans really lose this much drive when death is no longer an issue for them? Even if that's the case, neither Keith nor Berga seems any different from before.

Berga's only awareness of his immortality seemed to be that he'd gotten tougher. Berga aside, it was likely that Keith considered it trivial in comparison to the responsibility he felt toward his work.

Compared with them, how pathetic was he?

"But listen, ordinarily, you woulda been dead."

"...Only, as you can see, I'm alive. We don't die... That fact is everything."

Maybe he'd noticed that his younger brother was worrying over something; Berga didn't press the issue further.

"Is that so?" he said instead. "Well, if you say it's fine, then it's fine."

"What was more of a shock was the idea that Firo was in a similar situation last year, but he beat his attacker easily," Luck continued. "Whereas I got my throat slit without putting up any sort of fight. I feel like such a blockhead, I could cry."

Firo Prochainezo: the Gandor brothers' old friend and a young executive in the Martillo Family, whose territory abutted theirs. About a year ago, he'd been attacked by a drug addict, just as Luck had, and had coldcocked the guy without getting so much as a scratch.

"It feels as though my instincts have dulled since we became immortal."

"Nah, that ain't so. You never were good in a fight, that's all. What's the point of a weak guy stressing about being weak?"

"I can't imagine it's wise *not* to stress about it."

"....."

Keith had been watching their exchange in silence, but he

abruptly glanced at his watch, then stood and began pulling on his coat.

“Oh. Is it time to go home, Keith?” Berga asked.

“How’s Kate doing, by the way? She good?” Luck added.

Hearing the name of the woman he was married to, Keith nodded, putting on his hat. Although he had only nodded, it was rare for him to respond to words at all.

“Hey, Luck,” Berga teased. “Looks like fun, don’t it? You hurry up and find yourself a partner, too.”

“I will take it under active consideration.”

“Well, it’s probably gonna be tough with that bad-guy mug of yours.”

That’s not something I want to hear from you, Berga, he grumbled, though he managed to swallow it down. After all, Berga had already taken a wife, too.

“What about you, Berga?” Luck sniped back. “Have you made up with Kalia yet?”

“...Eh. Once you get hitched, you’ll understand. All sorts of stuff.”

Saying something that might have been profound and could just as easily have been an evasion, Berga also began getting ready to leave.

Not feeling particularly sad about being single, Luck prepared to see both of his brothers off as usual. However, the atmosphere suddenly changed.

They began to hear some sort of uproar, and the door to the room was kicked open.

“Boss! Boss! Trouble!”

“What the hell happened?!”

As Berga yelled at one of the members, a bloody man came in after him.

It was one of their executives, a man who ran a nearby betting parlor.

It was clear that he’d sustained an uncommonly severe injury, but in front of his bosses, the man stood tall, and he delivered his report without showing any emotion.

“My apologies, boss. We let the enemy take us by surprise. We ran most of ’em off, but we only managed to take one alive. The fault’s all mine.”

Behind the man who was dispassionately giving his report, in the center of a space that was filled with rows of billiard tables and the like, lay an unconscious man they didn’t recognize.

“Damages?”

A solemn voice echoed that word throughout the room. Opening the mouth he almost never used, Keith had asked his subordinate for

further information.

“All the races were over, so no ordinary customers were harmed. My men are fielding the cops. The parlor and me got a little busted up, but that’s it; there’s no problem.”

Blood was flowing from what seemed to be a gunshot wound, but as he finished speaking, the man even grinned.

Keith’s response was extremely simple.

“Good work.”

The man, who’d taken this as the highest possible praise, bowed respectfully, then left the room.

It was a daunting sight, but most of the people in the office looked on calmly, and some of them helped the injured man stop bleeding. The guy who’d panicked and burst into the office was an underling who’d just joined up, and he’d gone dead white at the smell of blood.

Passing by the new hire, another member bowed to the three brothers.

“Boss... A report just came in. There were three more incidents. They hit a gambling den, a speakeasy, and a motel. It sounds like they got driven away quickly at all locations, and our people only sustained a few grazes.”

At that report, Keith took off the coat he’d just put on, and Berga, clearly enraged, struck his right palm with his balled left fist. On the surface, Luck appeared calm, but he narrowed his eyes slightly, trying to put the current situation in order.

“Simultaneous attacks...? We’ve signed nonaggression pacts with the neighboring syndicates, and I don’t recall seeing any threatening movements.”

“Who cares who they are?! I’m going to knock ’em flying, knock ’em down, knock ’em straight to hell!”

“.....”

Just then, the man who’d been asleep in the center of the room woke up. He’d been knocked out by the betting parlor manager during the attack and had been carried off.

“Yeee...”

Registering the situation he was in, without thinking, the man gave a pathetic scream.

“Hey, hold it! ‘Yeee’? Did you say ‘Yeee’?”

Berga promptly ran up and drove a heavy kick into the man’s solar plexus. His toes sank in without a sound, sending an instantaneous impact through the man’s guts.

“What’s this ‘Yeee’ crap?! You didn’t see this coming or something?! You weren’t prepared for us to surround and murder you, and you came here anyway? Were you picking a fight with us? Huh?!”

While Berga was landing a series of kicks on the man, Luck slowly

came up beside him.

“...Well. Now we may finally learn who ordered my throat cut.”

When he saw the fox-eyed man who stood next to him, the poor captive screamed, spitting up blood:

“That’s nuts!! They slashed your throat—”

“Bingo, hmm? In other words, you ran off without even attempting to retrieve your comrade after it happened. Well, I expect you probably meant to send a junkie on a rampage and lower the reputation of our turf at the same time, but still.”

Speaking as if it bored him, Luck turned toward a door in the depths of the hall and called loudly:

“Tick! Tick!”

“Yesss? What is it, hmm?”

Tick poked his head out from behind the door. The scissors he’d had a short while ago were still in his hands.

“Here’s another one for you. Take care of him, if you would.”

When he saw the objects in the hands of the man who was approaching him, the captive broke out in full-body goose bumps and cold sweat.

When Tick reached the man, he looked genuinely sad.

“Listen, before we get started, let me apologize. I’m really sorry.”

At first, he thought he was apologizing for being about to torture him. Either way, the guy was a loony, but when the prisoner heard the words that came next, he wanted to cry from the bottom of his heart.

“I haven’t cleaned off the blood and grease from the earlier fellow yet. I don’t have any spare scissors right now, either. So, you see, they won’t cut very well, and—”

He snipped the scissors he held in both hands. They made light *snicking* noises, but at the same time, there was another, viscous sound, as if some sort of fat were being pulled into strings.

“—I think it’s probably going to hurt, quite a lot. At least twice as much as the man before you.”

“W-w-wait! I’ll talk! I’ll tell you anything!”

“Now, now, don’t say that. It took nerve to attack the Gandors’ businesses; show us that spirit.”

With those words, Tick brought the scissors closer to the man. For a moment, Luck thought about stopping him, but...

“By the way, Nicola, who was it that shot you?”

He directed the question to the bloodied man who’d made the report a moment ago. As the man he’d called Nicola bandaged himself, he answered with perfect composure: “Him. That’s why I brought him along. I’ll accept the punishment for bringing my personal feelings into the matter.”

Refraining from mentioning the bit about “personal feelings,” Luck turned to the captive and, smiling, handed down his sentence.

“You heard Nicola. Since you’re here, we might as well proceed.”

It was still there. I’m so glad I still had anger in me somewhere. Look at the strength of this hatred for the man who hurt Nicola and my comrades.

In their line of work, anyone could die at any time, either because they’d made an enemy or simply for a handful of change.

He knew this, and yet being able to stay quiet while his companions got hurt was an entirely different matter.

Feeling faintly relieved, Luck listened attentively to the screams he’d begun to hear.

Come to think of it, I wonder if they’re screaming like this right about now... No, I suppose they couldn’t, not underwater. The scum who killed four of our comrades a year ago. Those lowlife delinquents with their imperfect immortality, who are paying for their sins on the dark riverbed. What was the leader’s name again...?

Dallas Ge... Ju...? What was it? ...Even remembering is irritating.

As he rifled through old memories, Luck worried his lip slightly...

...So that he would never again lose sight of the anger inside himself.



The same day Late at night

The *Daily Days* newspaper

Standing in front of the newspaper offices, Keith slowly opened the door.

Even though it was the middle of the night, several men were busy working. On seeing Keith, one of them used an internal telephone line to contact a room somewhere.

After a brief conversation, the Asian man opened a door that led to the second floor, turned to Keith, and put his fists together in greeting.

Without a word, Keith went up to the second floor, then walked down the corridor to the door at the very back.

Telephone bells rang ferociously behind each of the doors along the corridor. The men in each room seemed to be fielding them constantly, but even then, the sound of the bells didn’t stop. Every person who came up to this floor had the same question: *Just how many lines do they have?*

At the very back was a plate that had DIRECTOR/PRESIDENT’S OFFICE

written on it. A chorus of telephone bells could be heard behind it as well.

"I'm glad you're here, Keith. I thought you might be stopping by soon."

No sooner had he opened the door than those words reached him.

There was a voice, but no one was visible. The voice, which sounded neither young nor old, came from behind the mountain of documents just in front of him. Keith tried to go around it, but half the room was buried in massive quantities of bundled paper.

"Impressive, isn't it? It's like a silent-era comedy film. There's simply no space to tidy up, you see. I can't get to the chair from there, so lately I've been coming and going through the window, by ladder. I had a police officer point a gun at me once."

The telephone bells were still ringing, but the voice reached Keith's ears quite clearly.

"Now then, how much of the information do you have already? From the reports that a poor wretch was dragged into your hideout, I expect you've learned who you're dealing with and what they're after, correct?"

Provided they happened in a place where people were around, this information broker was able to learn about most incidents before anyone else. The brokerage had modest contracts with all sorts of individuals within its system; it received a wide variety of information by telephone and through hearsay, and in exchange, it made regular payments. Its informants were the residents on the top floors of each tenement building, florists on street corners, policemen on patrol, and even members of the mafia themselves.

Keith had come here with a perfect understanding of all this, so he showed no particular reaction to the voice behind the documents. He simply listened, his expression quiet.

"Your enemy is a Runorata Family executive, Gustavo Bagetta. He's the man who's been put in charge of creating a foothold for their advance into Manhattan. True, the Runoratas are one of the largest organizations in New York, but there's one area in which they have no territory: Manhattan Island. Five big syndicates vie for space in Manhattan, and all of them have pipelines to major outfits in Chicago and San Francisco, or in their home countries. In other words, it isn't worth it to fight them just to create a foothold. As a result, they're planning to drive a wedge into gaps like your organization, then gradually expand their territory from there. Are you with me so far?"

Keith waited silently for the man to continue. The president seemed to take this as assent, and in the spaces between the sound of the bells, he began to speak again.

"To these newcomers, an outfit like yours, which doesn't deal with

any of the major syndicates, must have looked terribly appetizing. The Martillos' circumstances are similar; however, their boss and Bartolo, the Runorata boss, are from the same town. Although their organizations aren't linked, Gustavo probably considered the impression it would make on his boss and chose you instead."

The momentum of the words showed no signs of slowing, and they entered Keith's ears with the force of a flowing river.

"Gustavo is partial to rough methods, you see. He's spreading drugs around your territory before he steals it. In doing so, he may be attempting to increase the burden on you, but unfortunately, there's nothing about his intentions in the information. He doesn't negotiate, give warnings, or even declare war. He simply destroys, unilaterally, over and over. He rose to the rank of executive through his abilities, but he seems to have hit the ceiling. Bartolo isn't all that determined regarding Manhattan. The idea of a big syndicate like the Runoratas cutting into the town at this point is ridiculous in the first place. In other words, Gustavo's been demoted...although the man himself doesn't seem to have caught on yet."

Lowering his voice slightly, he began to speak about the opposing organization's internal situation.

"Gustavo's one thing, but I'd advise you never to underestimate the Runorata boss. After all, he managed to survive the Night of the Sicilian Vespers."

The Night of the Sicilian Vespers was a purge that had been carried out all across America in September of that year by Lucky Luciano's men. In order to build a new system for the mafia, they'd killed more than thirty mafia bosses with old-fashioned mind-sets. Then, they created "the Commission," an organization with a new system, one of meetings and a seven-member committee.

"Runorata was one of the so-called Mustache Pete bosses, an old-school boss, but not only did he make it through that wave, he's taken a step back from the Commission and kept his syndicate together. In other words, he's just that powerful. You'd better assume Gustavo has a man like that behind him. However, as I said earlier, he's *only* there. He isn't directly cooperating with Gustavo. As long as you understand that, it should be enough."

When he'd spoken that far, abruptly, the telephone stopped ringing.

"I cut the circuit temporarily. I want to be able to hear you clearly."

Behind the mountain of documents, the voice of the information brokerage president was quiet, but it clearly held something like curiosity.

"All right, Keith. You may already have known everything I've

said here. What sort of additional information would you like, and for what purpose? Of course I'll be asking for information and a reasonable sum of money in compensation, but words you speak are valuable all by themselves. It's been three years since I heard you speak more than five syllables. That was when you and the Martillos were on the verge of a conflict, if I recall. I was surprised at how well things cooled down, and I couldn't be more pleased that the information proved useful to you."

The voice from behind the documents stopped dead, and for a moment, silence flowed through the room.

Then Keith opened his mouth...





After putting his subordinates' reports in order, Gustavo abruptly pounded the desk with his fist.

"Dammit! What the hell is going on?! One of their bosses is dead. It's gotta be chaos over there; we poured in all that manpower, and we couldn't take one single hair off their ass?! And on top of that, they actually snatched one of our idiots!"

Since he thought Luck had been killed, the other organization's levelheaded response had taken him completely by surprise.

In thinking of the Gandors as a tiny, two-bit outfit, had they taken them too lightly when they'd struck? To make matters worse, although they'd found out where the guy who'd stolen the drugs lived, by the time they'd gone in, all they found was the sour smell of vomit. If things went on like this, Gustavo would be in serious trouble. Forget delivering good news to his boss; he might end up having to sweat and strain over a letter detailing even worse news.

In a room of the Wall Street hotel that they were using as their temporary hideout, Gustavo tried desperately to think of a way to break through the situation. However, he was a man who'd climbed to the top through brute force. There was no way he could come up with other methods easily at this late date.

He would have liked to use bombs and blow them and their businesses to kingdom come, but he didn't have the explosives. If he asked Bartolo, he'd probably arrange for some right away, but how in the world was he supposed to explain this failure?

"For Chrissakes, did we really just not have enough people? Next time I'll get a heavy concentration of men together, and—"

"Are you...all...right? You...look...ra...ther...pale."

Gustavo flinched at the abrupt voice from behind.

"B-Begg! What are you doing here?! You startled me, dammit!"

"I...told...you...I'd be...coming...today. I...wanted...to...see...the effects...of...my...drugs...with...my own...eyes."

"Tch! I'm busy right now. Do it later."

"I...can't...do...that. I...have...to...pick up...some...cargo...at...the...station...at the end...of...the...month. It's...big...cargo, so...I...want you...to...loan...me...a...few...people."

"Screw that! You think we've got that kinda... Wait, cargo? Drug materials?"

If that was it, they couldn't treat it carelessly. However, Begg's next words weren't even close to what Gustavo had expected.

"More...delicate...than...that.It's...something...my...friend..."

made. High...performance...explosives.”

Chewing the meaning of those words over in his mind, Gustavo slowly—and absolutely—understood them.

Firepower.

“Tell me more about that. Gimme details.”



“That’s how things stand, so if you would... Yes, although we still can’t predict which way the situation will go.”

In the office in the jazz hall basement, Luck was in the middle of a phone call. The people around him were watching him with tense expressions, but to whom he was speaking wasn’t clear.

“That’s right. In that case, we’ll be waiting for you at the end of the month. No, we’re the ones who’ll be looking forward to it.”

As he hung up, Luck turned to his brothers, who were next to him, and raised both hands.

“He said it’s okay. He’s coming in on a train at the end of this month.”

In spite of himself, Berga whistled, and—unusually—the corners of Keith’s mouth softened.

“All right, gentlemen. For a little while, until you have orders, I want every one of you to avoid all independent action. We’ll suspend business at the gambling dens and speakeasies for a time, too, on the pretext of remodeling. Until you receive orders, go deep underground to ensure you don’t become a target. Is that clear?”

At that order, confusion ran through all the nonexecutive members.

“Um...”

As if representing the rest, Tick spoke up, sounding mystified.

“Who’s coming, exactly?”

“Oh, that’s right. I can’t expect you to understand if I don’t tell you that. My apologies.”

With a smile that was genuinely happy, unlike his usual smile, Luck quietly said the name:

“The living legend, the world’s most egotistical hitman, Vino... Claire Stanfield.”



USE

December 29, 1931

“...Well. Things have gotten very odd indeed.”

A clear voice sounded from behind the document stacks.

Several people, including Nicholas, Elean, and Henry, were standing in the newspaper president’s office.

After he’d heard their reports, the president began to summarize the situation.

“Elean gave Miss Eve Genoard the Gandor Family’s name, I provided the Gandors with the Runoratas’ circumstances, and Nicholas sold information on Roy Maddock to the Runoratas... Does that sound about right? Nothing happened on your end, Henry? You said that Roy himself stopped by...”

“Unfortunately, we failed to reach a financial understanding, and so no business took place. *He left without purchasing any information.*”

As he brazenly talked away, Henry’s lips were very slightly warped.

“I see. Well, there’s no help for that. Nicholas, have one of your people casually check up on Lia. That bag really could be a trump card of some sort.”



“—That idiot!”

Edith was furious.

After giving the black bag to Lia, she’d gone straight to the Gandors’ speakeasy, but she was late, and apparently, before she’d arrived, the place had been attacked. They said they didn’t yet know who the assailants had been, but even she knew the Runoratas were probably behind it.

Since she’d been late, she’d been lucky enough to avoid getting pulled in, and for the moment, they’d cleaned up and opened the shop for business as usual. Her duties there had finally ended, and she’d returned home at dawn, but...

“Why is a timid guy like him being considerate when nobody asked?! What on earth is he thinking...?”

Her hands gripped a message from Roy, written on a little scrap of paper.

It said, in a terribly roundabout way, that he was going to try to do something about things himself, to keep Edith from getting involved. It also said that, until the matter was resolved, he wouldn't be coming back to the apartment.



"I-is this the place?"

He'd left Mulberry Street and was in the area near Central Park on Fifth Avenue. The surrounding scenery was gradually being buried in things Roy wasn't used to seeing. He'd almost never visited this area except to use the train station. One reason was that Roy detested the bourgeoisie and had actively avoided it.

The district in this area with a concentration of particularly high-class residences was commonly known as "Millionaires' Row." It was lined with the mansions and luxury apartments of the wealthy, including the Carnegie family.

Aware that he clearly wasn't dressed for the neighborhood and feeling inferior, Roy managed to find the mansion that Henry had told him about.

While obviously a rung below the great mansions that surrounded it, it was still in a completely different world from the hoi polloi. On the contrary, it wouldn't have been an exaggeration to say that its age gave it dignity. This building was the Genoard Family's former main residence, and at present, it was being used as a second home, serving as one of the symbols of the Genoard fortune.

"So she's in there..."

He'd reached the house, but he had no idea what to do next.

He couldn't go in, and even if he met her, what in the world could he say to her?

He'd considered kidnapping her, but that seemed like a last-ditch method. Besides, any woman who lived in a mansion like this one was bound to employ bearlike bodyguards.

If she was ever on her own, at least... If she went somewhere even a little ways away from this area...

Knowing there was no point in thinking anymore, for the moment, Roy decided to keep watching the house.



"Oh, miss! Are you feeling better?"

“Yes, Benjamin. I’m still a little tired, but I’m fine. I’m very sorry to have caused trouble for you.”

“What are you saying? I am prepared to do anything to aid your recovery, even offer up my own heart, should it come to that. If such is a servant’s duty...”

“Good heavens. It isn’t a demonic ritual, you know.”

Eve giggled a little, but her heart was filled with resolution.

I’ll go meet them. The members of the Gandor Family. I need to hear the truth from them. If my brother really has died, if possible, I’ll avenge him—

She wasn’t thinking of actually killing them, but she might be able to get the police to arrest them, somehow. Even as she thought this, in her heart she’d considered one more possibility.

If they were the ones who killed Dallas, then did they kill Father and Jeffrey as well...?

The car that had sunk into Newark Bay. Conditions that could have been either murder or an accident. Their horribly changed bodies.

As all this simmered in her heart, before long it led her to a single resolution.

Wishes and prayers would reach no one anymore.

Consequently, she’d just have to do this through her own strength. That was how she’d atone for her brother.

If she told Benjamin and Samantha about her idea, they were bound to either stop her or tell her to let them take care of it. She couldn’t do that. This was a selfish, personal desire.

If the Gandors killed her...

Would Benjamin and Samantha grieve for her?

No matter what the answer was, if she died a worthless death here, she’d be betraying them.

The thought hurt her, but her resolution couldn’t be checked that easily.

In short, she simply had to avoid dying.

She thought she understood just how difficult this would be, but—possibly because she’d been raised in a very sheltered environment—she didn’t seem able to visualize a concrete terror of the mafia.

They planned to return to New Jersey early next month. Before that happened, she needed to establish contact with the Gandors somehow.

First, she wanted to hear what they had to say. For now, that was her only objective.

Several guests were visiting the hotel where Gustavo and the others were staying.

“Well, that’s how it is. I hope you’ll help us out, Mr. Gustavo. Mr. Bartolo’s a great man, and we all have a lot of respect for him. Make sure you don’t do anything to disgrace him.”

With those sardonic words, the guests left the hotel.

Gustavo, left behind, ground his teeth and watched them go.

“The little bastards are getting cocky...”

The visitors had been messengers from the five big syndicates that controlled Manhattan.

Gustavo’s mind replayed the words they had said a few moments ago:

“We’re here for just one thing. We came to deliver a warning.”

“It sounds as if you got up to some pretty flashy stuff yesterday.”

“We don’t care what you do in the Gandor or Martillo territories. But—”

“Don’t forget that that area’s a boundary line, and our turf is right on the other side.”

“If you cause even a little trouble in our territory, we’ll take it as direct provocation.”

“Oh, we’re not saying we’ll start a war or anything. We’ll just lodge a complaint with your boss, Mr. Bartolo. You know what happens to your position if we do that, don’t you?”

“*Anything*, no matter how small. For example, if one of the Gandor men comes onto our turf, don’t you nab him or do him harm.”

“You’ve only got three free zones in that area: the Gandors’ turf, the Martillos’ turf, and the *Daily Days* newspaper. That’s about it... That and police headquarters, I guess.”

“The *Daily Days* is almost completely neutral. As far as appearances go, anyway.”

“That said, I wouldn’t recommend making enemies of those three places.”

“People like us and Mr. Bartolo are one thing, but *you*, Mr. Gustavo...”

“Do you know why we don’t mess with those three spots?”

“Of course, if we wanted to, we could crush them anytime.”

“It just wouldn’t pay, that’s all. Well, the *Daily Days*’s situation is unique, I suppose.”

“That place is a sort of underworld public facility, so to speak.”

“We don’t know how long that information brokerage has been around.”

“However, it’s a fact that it was here before our syndicate moved in.”

“People like our bosses and Mr. Bartolo could get pretty much any

information without relying on that place.”

“...But you sure couldn’t. I’d use that information broker as much as I possibly could, if I were you.”

“At any rate, whatever you do, be extremely careful not to cause us trouble.”

“Make sure you manage those drugs properly, too. Don’t let your new stuff find its way onto our turf.”

“We’re conducting negotiations for deals for the new drug with a fella called Begg, so that’s nothing to do with you.”

“Take care not to release more than a set quantity of those drugs.”

“We won’t be getting our hopes up, but do your best.”

“Don’t forget that Mr. Bartolo’s the one we want to be on good terms with. Not you.”

“I think it’s in your best interests to consider the possibility that you’ve been demoted to this area.”

“In short, well, you know. What we’re trying to say is—don’t push your luck. That’s what this is.”

“Those scumbuckets... Make a monkey out of me, will they...?”

He would have liked to give them a good makeover with a Thompson, but they were too far out of his league. Not only that, but they really did have genuine respect for Bartolo... So what were they doing, making such a fool of *him*, the man’s subordinate? Were they trying to say they didn’t acknowledge him as one of Bartolo’s men?

If he lashed out unwisely, he’d be starting a war over his own personal grudge. *If they’d at least talked smack about Bartolo, too*, he thought, but even if they had, the result would have been the same.

“You better watch yourselves... Once I finish off the Gandors, you’re next!”

Even as he stomped down his ferocious anger at the messengers, Gustavo blazed with hatred for the Gandors.

“I’ll have the Gandor pigs pick up the tab for my humiliation, along with everything else...”

Thinking typical small-timer thoughts, Gustavo hurled a hotel ashtray against the wall.



December 30, 1931 Night

In an underground casino on Martillo Family turf, Firo, who had been put in charge of running the place, was listening to a string of complaints from a now-penniless Berga.

“Firo, hey. Wouldja make it a little easier to score on the roulette wheels here?”

“Berga, you come to someone else’s turf and ask for *what?*”

As a rule, it would have been unthinkable for the boss of another organization to visit a place like this.

Firo and the three Gandor brothers had grown up in the same tenement and were practically family. That said, when it came to the interests of their organizations, they never colluded.

“Anyway, Berga, this is no time for you to be here, is it? I heard the situation with the Runoratas is a ticking bomb.”

Apparently, news of the attacks the day before yesterday had already reached the Martillos.

“Well, that’s *why*. If I hang around on our turf, they might take a shot at me, and I know for a fact the Martillos wouldn’t sign on with the Runoratas.”

“Just stay home. Don’t drag us into it.”

In the middle of that perfectly natural comment, Firo spotted a grifter and had him dragged into the back. He was talking with Berga only when he had a moment to spare.

However, when a certain individual’s name was mentioned in the course of the conversation, Firo’s eyes lit up.

“Claire? You mean *the* Claire?”

“What other Claire would be Claire besides Claire?!”

“I see... Well, that’s something to look forward to. So Claire’s coming... Then the Runoratas have as good as lost.”

Firo nodded to himself, predicting the defeat of the Runoratas solely by the existence of this Claire person.

“Nah, you don’t know that yet.”

“No, I know. That natural-born contract killer is coming back. There’s practically no one in this business who doesn’t know the Vino name by now. If you manage to lose anyway, you’re complete idiots.”

As they talked, a man approached them from behind.

He took a long, thin needle from the back of his necktie and, with no preliminary action, thrust it at Berga’s back, right over his heart. However—

“Anyway.”

Abruptly, an arm slid in from the side, catching the man’s elbow in a viselike grip. While that hand was still on his elbow, the other hand caught his opposite shoulder. The next instant, the man’s body was flipped, and as he was looking up at the ceiling, he was dashed to the floor.

As he involuntarily expelled the air from his lungs, a heel came down mercilessly on his solar plexus. The impact ran through him all

the way to the backs of his eyeballs, and he didn't even have time to scream.

"We don't need nitwits like this one causing trouble on our turf. Go home and take him with you."

"Oh, yeah. Right. My bad."

Scratching his head awkwardly in response to Firo's words, Berga picked the guy up and left the gambling den.

"Geez. I can almost see that Tick fella dancing a jig over this."

Remembering the torturer's innocent smile, Berga felt just a little sorry for his attacker.

Still, letting him go had never been an option.



"You know where that bastard Roy is?"

For a moment, Gustavo's eyes shone, but in the next instant, they were clouded by dissatisfaction.

"Then why haven't you nabbed him already?"

One of the men timidly answered his direct superior's question:

"Well, uh, the thing is, he's on Millionaires' Row. That's not part of the Gandors' turf."

"You morons! You're telling me you took that threat seriously?!"

"S-see, Mr. Gustavo... This ain't good. When we spotted the junkie there, we started watching him... And, obviously, we were dressed to blend in, y'know? Anyway, about five fellas in black showed up and said, 'Why don't you quit playing around here and help us with our job instead? If you want money, we'll pay you a kiddie allowance.'"

"And you just clammed up and came back here."

"No, uh, we left one guard. It didn't sound like Roy was working with the guys in that territory. But those fellas were real bad news! It sorta seemed like they knew all our faces, all the guys who came here, and they're keeping their distance, but I swear they're watching us! This ain't good, they're the real dealzubluplugaah!"

The poor guy didn't even get to finish his sentence before a heavy marble ashtray buried itself in his face.

"So what? Hey, pal, you sound like you're sayin' we *ain't* the real deal!"

Gustavo kept kicking the man tenaciously, even though he was already unconscious.

"Dammit... They're all messing with me, *all* of 'em, *every last one!*"

At the sight of Gustavo's irritation, the eyes of his subordinates rapidly grew cold.

The only one who failed to notice those looks was Gustavo himself.

“Get the hell out of here, you bastards!”

His men left the room, as ordered. They’d forgotten to report something essential.

Either that, or they’d intentionally let it slip their minds.

It was the fact that the place Roy had been watching was the second Genoard residence.



December 31, 1931 Afternoon Near Pennsylvania Station

In a back alley not far from the station, the three Gandor brothers were talking with a young man.

“All right, let’s go. Who should I kill first? I only managed to get a little light exercise last night, and I’m feeling rusty. I want to do a job where I can go all-out for once.”

The young fellow said this to the brothers without hesitation, even though they were technically mafia dons.

Claire Stanfield. Although he was the Gandors’ sworn brother, someone who’d grown up under the same roof with them, he wasn’t affiliated with the Gandor Family. He was a freelance hitman, a force whose alias, Vino, was known throughout underworld society. In a way, a hitman whose name was well-known had a problem, but as far as he was concerned, the fact that his fame was spreading gave him no trouble.

If he did have a problem, it was his eccentric personality. It was completely different from that of a murdering hedonist or pathological liar, a unique character that couldn’t be considered either normal or aberrant.

Today, as usual, no sooner had he reunited with the brothers than he began saying incredibly weird things. The minute they met up, he started walking quickly, heading toward the Gandor hideout as though he was short on time.

“Let’s get this finished up fast. I’ve got somebody to look for after this. It’s somebody who might marry me.”

At Claire’s words, the three brothers looked at one another.

“Wha—? Did you ask some total stranger to marry you *again*?!”

“Close.”

“Don’t gimme ‘close,’ you moron! Just how many dolls do you think you’ve gotten to give you the brush-off that way, huh?!”

Berga sounded disgusted, but Claire answered him without seeming the least bit flustered.

“Now, hang on. I don’t treat it like a pickup, and I’m not joking.

I'm being serious, so there's no problem. And I'm positive I've gotten dumped up till now because there's an even better girl in my future. After all, this world is—"

"—'designed to work in my favor,' was it?"

With practiced timing, Luck got in a comeback. That was probably Claire's basic mind-set. According to him, *Even if I die, I bet this world is a dream, and I'll just keep dreaming from the real world. For now, I'll just assume that's how it is.* Naturally, Luck and the others didn't understand a bit of it.

If that was all you heard, he sounded like a mere escapist, but he also had the skills to put that thought into action, and he spared no effort in maintaining them. That was the most troublesome thing about this Claire guy.

"In any case, Claire. You really shouldn't trust the sort of woman who accepts an offer of marriage out of the blue."

When Luck abruptly said Claire's name, Claire immediately went back to acting strange.

"Claire's dead. Or he will be on paper, anyway, as far as the government's concerned."

Wearing his emotions on his face—*There he goes again, making absolutely no sense*—Luck hit him with a levelheaded verbal jab:

"If you're officially dead, you won't be able to marry that woman, you know."

At that, Claire stopped in his tracks, then turned around.

"Crap. What do I do? How much does it cost to buy an identity?"

"You aren't making any sense, Claire. In that case, what should we call you from now on?"

As Claire started walking again, he said casually:

"Well, maybe Vino... Or you could call me the Rail Tracer."

"Lame."

As he watched Claire and Berga, who'd begun to brawl violently in the alley, Luck sighed, looking mildly disgusted.

They complain, but those two really do get along, don't they...?

Just as he thought this, one of Berga's teeth flew his way. The tooth immediately zipped back to Berga's body in order to regenerate, and so, as he broke out in a cold sweat, Luck pretended he hadn't seen anything.



"Laws a-mercy, there're folks sluggin' one on t' other, right smack in da middle of da road."

Samantha tried to peek in from behind the rubberneckers, but Benjamin coughed and held her back.

“Don’t concern yourself with such vulgar individuals! Come, come, miss, let’s hurry and move along.”

“Hmm? Oh, yes, of course.”

The butler’s words brought Eve back to herself with a jolt. She’d been lost in thought, and she hadn’t even noticed that a fight had broken out.

Whatever can I do to meet the Gandors?

“Never fear, miss.”

“Ah—?”

When the butler spoke, for a moment, Eve’s heart thumped. Had he read her thoughts?

“The dishes Samantha and I prepare aren’t sufficient to restore your appetite, are they? I thought not, and so yesterday I contacted a chef of my acquaintance. I requested that he refer an available cook and bartender to us, even if only for the duration of our sojourn in New York. I am told they will be arriving by train today, so I expect they’ll present themselves tomorrow.”

“O-oh, no, you really don’t need to do that! And in any case, a bartender...?”

The butler answered this perfectly natural question with a mischievous, boyish smile.

“In the basement, I discovered a wine cellar that predates the law. I’ve been searching for someone capable of setting those many bottles of wine in order. Simply possessing them isn’t a crime, you see. In addition, after all, the mansion is equipped with that bar. We’ve come all the way to New York, and I wanted you to enjoy the city’s atmosphere to the greatest extent possible. I’ll pay his salary out of my own savings. Do allow me this indulgence, miss.”

“Benjamin...”

“Don’tcha go forgettin’ I’m shelling out my own bread to employ the cook. See, Missy Eve, that’ll spare me the tahn spent in da kicchin, and then I kin put more zip into other jobs, so don’t you fret.”

Samantha also smiled at Eve as she smacked Benjamin lightly on the back.

“Would you desist?! Harrumph... In addition, if there are more people available to help with household chores, we’ll be able to concentrate harder on the search for Master Dallas.”

These two were the type who couldn’t stand that sort of excess, and yet...

It was clear that they were doing it for her, out of thoughtfulness. Feeling terribly grateful and apologetic, Eve desperately fought back the tears that were threatening to spill over.

“Thank you very much. I truly am grateful to you, Benjamin and Samantha.”

She felt wretched for trying to do something selfish right under the noses of her two benefactors, and she couldn’t forgive herself for it.

Even so, it was too late for her to stop these thoughts...

They’d finished their shopping and were on their way back to Millionaires’ Row when, in front of a certain general-goods store, they heard another commotion.

“C’mon, buddy, sister, you’re really gonna buy all this?”

“Sure we are! Load ’em into the flivver!”

“We’re cornering the market! It’s a monopoly!”

The proprietor of the general store was helping a guy in a ragged gunman outfit and a young woman in a bright-red dress.

“Nah, I’m real happy you’re buying them, but what’re you gonna do with all of ’em?”

“Knock ’em down!”

“Clickclickclick, like that!”

As Eve watched the couple who were engaged in this odd conversation from a distance, something about them tugged at her.

Oh, I see.

Abruptly, it hit her. They looked like *that* couple. The pair of burglars who’d come to the mansion a year before and brought her happiness.

Then they were swallowed up by the waves of people, and she lost sight of them almost immediately.

She didn’t know whether they really had been the same people, but in her heart, Eve offered up a small prayer.

I’m sure they’re still spreading happiness around somewhere.

As she recalled what had happened a year ago, memories of the happiest time in her life rose in her mind.

Tearing up slightly, Eve quietly renewed her resolution.



“It’s...been...a...long...time. You...seem...well. That’s...great.”

In front of a passage that led to the station’s back entrance, two figures were conversing.

“Mm-hmm. You look good, too, Begg.”

Begg was talking with one of his old companions.

“Did...you...meet...Maiza?”

In response to this question, the shadow nodded once.

In contrast to Begg, who was smiling cheerfully, the other figure looked vaguely sad.

“Begg, the thing is—”

“I...heard. A freight...robbery, was...it?”

“—That’s right. The explosives weren’t on board officially, so I can’t report them to the police, but...”

“I...see. Well, of...course.”

“I suppose this means the Runoratas are going to kill me, *over and over...*”

The figure sounded a little uneasy. Begg smiled and shook his head.

“Bartolo, my boss, isn’t...touching...this...one. I...was...planning...to pay...all...the...money...myself. You...won’t...have to...be...punished.”

At that answer, the figure looked slightly startled.

“Why—?”

“I...heard...about...your...situation...from the infor...mation...broker. I wanted...to help...you...out...somehow, but...I...couldn’t...just...give...you...money, you...see?”

On hearing that, the figure’s expression shifted into something complicated.

“You’ve got a soft heart. You haven’t changed. Thanks, but—”

“I...shouldn’t...have...bothered? I...know. But...I...abandoned...alchemy. I’ve...lived...without...it...all...this...time, and all...I...gained...was...money. I...haven’t...found...the...happiness...I...want...yet, either. The...only...thing...I...can do...is smile...at...you...this...way.”

In the midst of his smile, only his eyes hinted at sadness.

“That’s enough, all by itself. Thank you.”

Moving slowly, the figure clung to Begg. Begg stroked its head with his left hand.

“Thanks, Begg. For...not eating me.”

Looking at the figure, which shed a couple of tears as it smiled, Begg cried a little, too.

“Next...time...you...say a...thing like that, I’ll...get...angry.”





“Hey, Berga, you’ve gotten pretty tough. Coming out of a fight with me without a scratch...”

Claire raised his voice, sounding impressed.

Even though they’d fought so spectacularly, both had emerged unscathed.

Berga’s injuries had just healed through the power of immortality, but Claire physically hadn’t taken any damage.

When Keith and the other three returned to their office on foot, no one was there except for Tick, who lived there. Since everyone had been ordered to stay home and wait, this was only natural.

“All right, on to the main topic: Who am I killing? If I’m taking out Bartolo, I’ll need to get myself psyched up for it, but if it’s just Gustavo, I can get him today if you want.”

“You know a lot about this.”

“Bartolo’s hired me a few times. I’d bet Gustavo doesn’t know that, though.”

“...If you’re a contract killer, do try to preserve client confidentiality, please.”

“Ha-ha-ha! You’re as picky as ever, Luck. Well, it’ll be fine. You guys aren’t going to rat me out or anything, right? ...*Right?*”

Claire sounded entertained. Luck explained the substance of the job, speaking for his brothers:

“Well then, Claire. First: Don’t do anything. Until we ask, just wander around town, if you would.”

“What?”

Claire looked a little confused. Luck narrowed his eyes, as if he was plotting something.

“For the moment, we want you to act as a deterrent.”



Right about then, Gustavo was raging in a hotel room.

“You’ve gotta be shitting me, Begg! You think you can just say, ‘Somebody stole it,’ and that’ll be it?! I was *counting* on these bombs of yours!”

“I had him...tell me...how to...make...them. Give...me...a... month...and...I...can...mass-produce...them...at that...factory.”

“That’s not fast enough! *Dammit!* I thought I’d get to blast the Gandors’ turf sky-high right this second! The speakeasies and the

gambling dens and the betting parlors, everything, customers and all!”

“Are...you...crazy?”

“Shove it! I don’t care how it looks anymore! I tell you what, that friend of yours is pretty useless, yeah?”

On hearing that, with a speed that was utterly different from any of his previous movements, Begg got right up in Gustavo’s face.

“Gah?! Wh-what?!”

“Don’t mock my...friend.”

That was all he said. Then Begg stepped back again. Even if it had only been for a moment, Gustavo had been overwhelmed, and without thinking, he clenched his fists and squeezed out a sore loser’s line.

“Hah! Well, it’s true, ain’t it?! Any loser who lets someone lift the tools of his trade is the lowest, most incompetent merchant ever!”

On hearing those words, Begg looked blank for a moment. Then he laughed loudly.

“Ha-ha-ha! You...couldn’t...be more...right! I...haven’t...laughed out...loud...in ages. Thanks!”

With that parting shot, Begg left the hotel room.

“What the hell?”

Failing to understanding the intent behind the man’s actions, Gustavo thought about what he’d said.

Getting the tools of your trade stolen. Lowest, most incompetent...

Drugs. Roy. Robbery. Person in charge. Me.

“Huh?”

Finally registering the meaning of Begg’s laugh, he hurled his third ashtray at the window glass.

“You meant *meeeeeeeeee!*”



That night at the information brokerage, the executives held a report meeting.

“The most noteworthy information tonight is probably the incident aboard the *Flying Pussyfoot*, the one Rachel got pulled into while she was on the train. After all, it looks as though Senator Beriam himself is working to cover up the affair. I’m requesting information from my acquaintances at the railway company by telegraph as well, but even then, I doubt we’ll manage to gather all of it. The problem is that red monster Rachel says she saw; however, I have an idea about that. They say the hitman Vino was on that train, and I think if we speak to him, we may be able to get nearly all the information that exists regarding this incident.”

“Vino... You mean Claire Stanfield? Didn’t he die in the conductors’ room?”

Nicholas's question received a confident-sounding reply from behind the documents.

"This is only a hunch, mind you, but...that was probably someone else. Scraping the face off, then burning the body: That's rudimentary camouflage. He's slapdash, and that's just like him. Besides, Rachel, who reported this incident, doesn't seem to have told me quite everything. She's a habitual ride-stealer, and considering the fact that she was released easily, it's likely that she got a ticket from someone. She isn't brazen enough to steal one from a corpse."

"You mean, in that case, the only people with spare tickets would have been the conductors?"

The genie of the documents agreed with Elean.

"Right, except both conductors were dead. Taking that into consideration, I think she may have met Claire and been told to keep quiet about it. She's terribly conscientious about such things."

After a short pause, he added a few miscellaneous thoughts on Claire.

"Besides, I really can't believe he'd die that easily. I can't think of many people who could kill him. Ronny of the Martillo Family, or Chané Laforet of the Lemures..."

He listed a few other names, then, at the end, gave the name of the most likely candidate:

"Or...the Handyman, Felix Walken. He might be able to win... Although I hear he wants to get out of the hit business."

"Felix Walken? Is he still in town?"

A hint of astonishment came onto Nicholas's face.

"Yes, he has a daughter now, and it sounds as though he wants to get rid of his past, but... They say he's the best in Manhattan and that he could take on Albert Anastasia's Murder, Inc.—the one directly under Lucky Luciano's control—all by himself. No one's going to let him retire that easily."

At that point, the president changed the subject and spoke about the incidents surrounding the Runorata.

"—And that should do it. By the way, Nicholas. What happened to that black bag?"

After summarizing the day's movements, he checked on an item of information that hadn't yet been reported.

"No particular problems. We got a report that two men entered Lia Lin-Shan's room, but it was probably her younger brother, Fang Lin-Shan; he was supposed to arrive today."

"They're both Chinese? Odd names, if so."

"Their father was British, so it's probably related to that. From what I hear, their community tended to keep them at a distance, and

the brother caused some sort of trouble because of it.”

“What about the other man?”

“We haven’t confirmed this yet, but apparently, he’s the brother’s friend, a young man by the name of Jon Panel.”

“You know a lot about it. You managed to check into him that quickly?”

“No, it’s just—those two were involved with the *Flying Pussyfoot* incident as well. It’s a coincidence.”

This satisfied all the executives, and they nodded. Then the president wrapped things up:

“All right, Nicholas, you keep your men on that. Tracking the movements of that sort of perpetually moving thing is very important. The liquor-of-immortality affair last year was the same way, remember? In that incident, all the coincidences were focused on that drifting liquor. Well, in the end, it proved impossible to predict its movements completely. Compared with that, we’ve been able to observe the movement from the very beginning this time, so nothing could be easier. Then, let’s see, regarding strange things that happened today... ‘An ashtray fell out of the sky and struck a Ford.’ ... What’s that supposed to mean?”



“What should I do?”

In a room on the first floor of a tiny apartment building in a corner of Little Italy, Lia Lin-Shan was gazing at the black bag, thoroughly perplexed.

Her friend Edith had left it in her care, and that was fine, but this room didn’t even have a lock, and she couldn’t keep it here forever. Precisely because it was something that would have to be handed over to the police in an emergency, she needed to put it somewhere more secure.

She’d told Edith she’d leave it with someone she could trust, but when it came right down to it, she wasn’t sure whom she should give it to. She’d have felt safest leaving it with Ronny or Maiza, but since she was supposed to keep it secret from the syndicate members, that wasn’t an option.

Should she ask Ennis, maybe? As she was thinking about it and fiddling with the handle of the bag, she heard a knock at the door to her room.

For a moment, she flinched, but the voice that followed set her heart skipping cheerfully.

“It’s been forever. It’s me, sis.”

The voice belonged to her younger brother, who ordinarily lived

far away.

“Uh, 'scuse me...”

Her brother and the young man who'd come with him were planning to stay here for the night.

Apparently, the dining car on the train where they'd worked had been closed suddenly, and tomorrow, they'd be starting at new jobs with a rich person who lived on Millionaires' Row.

“Huh? You'll be living there?” Lia asked.

“Yes, we will. They say we can bring all our luggage, too. They've got a big safe, so they said we could bring our valuables or anything else and not have to worry—”

When she heard those words, Lia's problem evaporated.

Trustworthy people with access to a safe place had appeared, just like that.



"What'll I do? That Roy... I wonder where he went."

Edith had spent the past few days desperately searching for Roy.

Even from a distance, it had been obvious that mafia-type thugs were watching his apartment. Roy probably wasn't dumb enough to go back there.

At the same time, that meant he hadn't been caught yet.

In search of a glimmer of hope, Edith decided to visit a place she'd heard rumors about: an information broker.

Behind the door under the *Daily Days* sign, several members of the editorial staff were hard at work, even though it was New Year's Day.

"Welcome to our information brokerage. We sincerely appreciate your visit."

The first person to speak to her was, put briefly, a man with a nasty smile. She felt a little sorry she'd come in, but it was too late to turn back.

"Have you come to inquire about a regular subscription to our newspaper? Or perhaps you're here for information?"

The man's courteous attitude made Edith nervous, but she told him, "For information."

"In that case, if you'd step this way. My name is Henry. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

The man at the desk warped his unpleasant face even further and ushered Edith into a reception room.



Just then, in the president's office, Nicholas was talking to the genie of the documents.

"Henry's hiding something."

"I know. He's still a bad liar."

"There's nothing wrong with his provision of information. He just enjoys it way too much."

"He doesn't know the risk of information yet, that's all. If he ever gets himself into some sort of dangerous scrape, that bad habit should improve slightly, but..."

A rather complicated emotion crept into the voice that issued from behind the paper stacks.

"If possible, I don't want anyone on my staff to encounter that sort

of situation. After all, that's what information is for in the first place."



Handling information is a pleasure. That's why I chose this occupation. Information brokers stealthily pass notes to one another in back alleys and the corners of bars; I thought that image was everything. Whoever would have thought such a conspicuous brokerage existed?

Manipulating information means manipulating something that accompanies it. Sometimes that's money, sometimes people, sometimes lives, sometimes cities. In the end, I'd wager it's possible to move nations, or even the world.

What an exquisite pleasure it is to hold all these fates in the palm of one's hand. None of the drugs that have been popular of late could ever compare. It makes you feel as if you've become a god but with all your wits intact.

It's the same at this company. Of the information regarding the current Runorata and Gandor affair, I'm the only one who knows that Roy is pursuing Eve. This incident is connected: It forms a ring. That is information I alone hold. One could say my position in the world that surrounds this affair is more advantageous than anyone else's.

Still, that Roy fellow seems to have begun dancing to the tune of my information with astonishing ease. That's what makes this job so addictive. Up until now, thanks to Nicholas, Elean, and the president, it never went well, but this time it did, yes indeed.

Roy's a hopeless imbecile, though. There's no way a little girl like that would know about the drug factory, no way she could possibly become a witness. Even if he did manage to make contact and kidnap her, the moment he threatened the Runoratas, they'd simply destroy the evidence, and that would be the end of it.

Even if he escaped the Runoratas, he'd have become a kidnapper.

There's no way to prove any connection to this newspaper, and I was not doing business: I simply murmured to myself.

Of course, if he'd had money, I would have served him properly. I am a merchant, and I flatter myself that I do have that much pride.

When all is said and done, he's the dregs of society, scum that has turned to drugs and is bound for destruction.

I loathe fellows like that from the bottom of my heart... In consequence, I merely finished him off, that's all.

There's absolutely no problem. None, none, none.

And now, this woman is here as a customer.

Roy's sweetheart, Edith, hmm? This has gotten interesting.

I want to twist her fate, too.

Controlling the fates of two lovers at once. What a delight that would be!

"I do have some idea of where Roy may be."

"Really?!"

"As a matter of fact, the other day, I had the opportunity to speak with him privately..."

As I told her everything that had occurred between us, I saw her face grow paler and paler. That was amusing to watch, all on its own.

"Just a minute... Then where's Roy?"

"I'd imagine he's probably attempting to do something with Miss Eve. *I did warn him against it*, you know."

"I've got to stop him..."

As she hastily tried to rise from her chair, Henry struck her with a brisk statement:

"And where do you intend to go? You don't know Miss Eve's whereabouts, do you?"

At that, Edith shot Henry an intense glare.

"Tell me. I'll pay whatever you ask!"

She slapped her pocketbook down on the table, but Henry shook his head.

"What do you mean to do by stopping him? It really is the only remaining way to save him, no matter how slight the possibility may be."

"That isn't true. You said so yourself: It was the only way because Roy didn't have money. In other words, if he'd paid a proper sum, there was proper information available. Right?"

"I would advise you not to get too carried away." His expression clouding slightly, Henry tossed Edith's pocketbook back at her. "Do you think information that could be used to outwit the Runoratas is something individuals such as yourself and Roy could easily obtain? Don't misunderstand me."

Slowly rising from his chair, he put his face up close to the woman's. His tone and the look in his eyes had undergone a drastic change: He was like a god who governed the truth of the world—or possibly more like a devil.

"*Information is power.* It's only natural that there's a cost to obtain it, is it not? Then, too, those without power die. That is also perfectly natural. It couldn't possibly be so cheap that those without the strength to serve as the price—financial clout, or authority, or personal connections—could acquire it easily."

Abruptly, his face and tone returned to normal, and he resettled himself deeply in his chair.

“—That is how matters stand. Have I made myself clear?”

Edith glared at the man. Despite his sentiment, she spoke in a voice filled with a quiet determination...

“In that case, let me ask. What sort of information could compensate for that information? Give me an example.”

Shrugging as if he was mildly surprised, Henry thought for a bit, and then he remembered the executive meeting the night before and gave his answer:

“Have you heard of the incident that took place yesterday aboard the *Flying Pussyfoot*?”

“...And so, in order to learn about important aspects of the incident, the information held by this contract killer, Vino—or rather, his testimony—is vital.”

When he’d spoken that far, Henry paused and drew a deep breath.

“Well, to cut a long story short, if it was in exchange for Vino’s story, I believe I could tell you both Eve’s location and a way to escape the Runoratas.”

“You mean it? Swear.”

With no hesitation, Edith made as if to leave. Henry asked her a single question:

“Why would you go that far?”

“Promises. It took him time, but he kept his. I don’t have time, though. If I don’t work fast, he’ll die. That’s all.”

“Really?” Henry asked, surprised. “That’s really the only reason?”

“That’s what promises are, aren’t they? Even if they really aren’t worth it.”

Not even turning to look at Henry, she flung the door open. Her expression was determined.

“I heard all that, you bottom-dweller.”

At the voice that abruptly addressed him from behind, Henry shuddered involuntarily.

“Do you even know what *shame* means? You’d better be prepared to take a pay cut, at least.”

“M-Mr. Nicholas.”

When he turned around, the English-edition copy editor was standing there, scowling. Apparently, at some point, he’d come in through the door at the back of the reception room.

“W-wait, please. If this is about Roy, he had no money, so as an alternative, I—”

“Oh yeah? And why didn’t you report that, hmm?”

“Because I was technically not at work.”

“Meaning you were slacking on the job for that time, huh?”

Nicholas had grabbed Henry’s collar, and Henry steeled himself, certain he’d be hit.

However, no fists flew his way, and the hands abruptly lifted.

“Still, out of consideration for the guts you showed at the end there, I won’t slug you. That was really clever. The president’s a softy, after all. He’ll probably call it even for you after this.”

“R-really?”

On seeing how Henry looked, Nicholas furrowed his eyebrows again.

“What? Did you say it without knowing?I see.”

Gazing at Henry with eyes that seemed somehow pitying, he went back to his own post.

“Poor guy. Well, this’ll be a great opportunity for you to experience the risk the president was talking about. Get through the jaws of death and grow a ton as a person. Just be careful not to actually die.”

Left by himself, unable to understand what Nicholas meant, Henry began to feel uneasy.

What’s going to happen, exactly? Curses! This is why those without information are powerless!



Edith stepped into the Gandors’ office, prepared to die.

As she went down the stairs to the basement, she reflected on the idea that had brought her here.

No matter how she thought about it, the only people around her who might know about hitmen were the three Gandor brothers. It was no more than a possibility, but still, for now, it was the only lead she had.

However, if she was going to ask them, she’d probably have to tell them everything. They might fly into a rage and beat her to death on the spot, or maybe they’d wait until right after she’d rescued Roy and kill them both. Even so, as long as there was a chance, she had to cling to it.

Taking Roy and skipping town was also an option, but Roy probably wouldn’t let her abandon her friends and family. If she doggedly talked him around, he might agree to it, but after that, they’d both regret it for the rest of their lives.

Resolving to shield him from a rain of bullets with her own body if it came to that, Edith stepped off the last stair with the determination of someone jumping off a cliff.

“Oh, heeey. It’s Edith. C’mon iiiiin.”

The room was mostly empty, and she saw Tick at the table in the center. Who was the guy sitting on the other side? At the very least, he'd never stopped by the speakeasy.

When she looked, she saw that Tick and the guy had something spread out across the table.

A large quantity of new scissors, their sharp blades gleaming.

"Isn't it great? We bought a lot. They cut really well."

As he spoke, Tick smiled like a child.

The guy across from him had his palm spread flat across the tabletop, and:

Tunk. Tunk. Shunk. Tunk. Tunk, tunk, shunk, tunk, shunk-a-shunk-tak-shunk

taktaktaktaktaktaktaktaktaktaktaktaktaktaktaktaktaktak!

He was jabbing the tips of the scissors into the spaces between his five fingers, rapidly traveling back and forth, rhythmically and powerfully. The speed grew faster and faster, until finally the scissors began to leave afterimages and it looked as though there were several pairs.

Not only that, but when she looked closer, she realized that every time the guy stabbed the scissors in, he was *closing and opening the blades*.

When the blades were open, the tips jabbed into two places, straddling one of his fingers, and as he raised them again, he closed the scissors.

One wrong move, and he might have lost a finger.

“Wow, that’s really, really coooool! Maybe I’ll try that...”

"I wouldn't. If you cut yourself, it hurts. Bad."

“Hmm, I wouldn’t like that. I know, I’ll try it with the hand of the next person I torture.”

As she listened to their conversation, a cold thread ran down her spine.

I might need to be prepared for more than just death...

For an instant, she came very close to hesitating, but it was already too late.

"Mr. Keith, Mr. Berga, Mr. Luck! Edith's here!"

Just as Tick finished yelling, the three bosses appeared through a door at the back.

“Well, Edith. What brings you here? Oh, we’ve closed the speakeasy for a while, but you’ll be paid as usual—”

"No, Mr. Gandor, that isn't it. That's not it."

There was no going back now. Intent on saving Roy, she took a step into hell.

“Mr. Gandor, I’ve...betrayed you.”

After hearing her whole confession, for a short while, the three of them looked grave. Then, after glancing at his older brothers, Luck spoke first.

"We understand what you've told us, Edith. Frankly, it's a pity you weren't able to trust us. Although it is a shame, at the moment, we don't intend to do anything about Roy."

At his answer, Edith's face lit up.

"Do you mean it, sir?!"

"Well, he isn't one of our comrades, and to be honest, we can't insist that people we haven't even met conform to our rules. And while it's true we aren't involved in the drug trade, that type of product hasn't spread far enough among the outfits for a tacit understanding about their handling in the first place."

When he'd said that much, Luck's smile abruptly vanished.

"However, Edith. You are a problem. You knew drugs were against our rules, and yet you covered up the facts. Even if you're only a speakeasy waitress, since you have aligned yourself with us, this was a definite act of betrayal."

Oh... He's right. I was prepared for this, but if they're going to kill me, I wish they'd let me make sure Roy's all right first.

"Now then, regarding your punishment... In all honesty, there's no precedent for this. I'm not sure what to do... What do you think, Keith? Berga?"

Luck's two brothers were standing beside him, and he looked to them for answers. However, Berga announced, "I dunno. Whaddaya wanna do?" and looked at Keith, while Keith played with his deck of cards and looked faintly troubled.

In the end, the three of them stepped away for a moment, discussing what to do in low voices.

"So what should we do?" asked Luck.

"Hell if I know," Berga replied. "Whadda they usually do?"

"In Sicily, they occasionally kill people for adultery, but...this is different, isn't it?"

"Like we could kill her for this, you moron?! Why not just call it good and let her off?"

"If we do that, we'll lose face," Luck insisted. "I know, I know, I think killing a woman over something like this is out of the question as well, but we have to do *something*. We need to come up with some sort of mild penalty."

"Dock her pay for the month, maybe?" Berga offered.

"We aren't a company."

"Well then, what do we do? If she were a guy, I could slug 'im and bust all his teeth, and we'd be done."

"Look, we can't *do* that! Striking women is despicable."

"I *know* that, dammit! So, fine, we just let her go. There's nothing else to do."

"But we need a reason of some sort... Agh, if we let her go, we're bending the rules, but we mustn't get violent, either." Luck scratched his head.

"How 'bout giving her some kinda chance?"

"Chance?"

"Jorgi embezzled from us, and we gave *him* a ninety percent chance of surviving. Even if he did end up biting it."

"Still, we can't make her do Russian roulette..."

"....."

"Hey, how 'bout we have her draw one of Keith's cards, and if she pulls the joker, she's guilty?"

"That's it! And we'll take the joker out ahead of time!"

"....."

On hearing that, Keith looked a bit troubled again. He turned the stack of cards over and showed them the fronts.

"Whaaat?! They're *all* jokers?!"

"I've been wondering about that; where do you buy things like this?!"

"Don't tell me you bought fifty-two decks and picked out all the jokers, one by one! ...Uh, Keith?"

"....."

"W-well, uh, how 'bout if she pulls a joker she's innocent?!"

"That doesn't make any sense!"

What sort of terrible things are they talking about? I wonder how they're going to kill me...

As Edith watched the three brothers' backs in a corner of the room, sweat started to break out on her own.

Tick and the other guy had been watching, and finally, as if they'd gotten sick of it, they made a move.

The mystery man had been juggling five pairs of scissors, but his hands abruptly stopped, and he whispered something in Tick's ear. Snipping and snicking away with a pair of new scissors, Tick called to the three brothers in a lazy voice:

"Say, Edith did something bad, riiight?"

Hearing him, Luck turned around. He sounded perplexed:

"Something bad?... Yes, but it isn't as though she's broken the law. I supposed you could say she did something bad as far as the neighborhood is concerned."

"Y'knoow, she's got really long hair, doesn't she?"

"Well, yes...?"

At that, Luck suddenly seemed to realize something. Tick was beaming, and his eyes looked almost abnormally innocent.

“Can I cut it?”

“I’ve been thinking this for a while now, but...”

As the sound of the scissors echoed, the young man who’d been juggling shears muttered something:

“Maybe you’ve made good a little, but deep down, you guys ain’t cut out to be mafia bosses. Seriously.”

A woman’s hair is her life. There’s no telling which era those words were originally from, but in any case, cutting a little of it settled the matter. It was so unexpectedly easy that all the strength went out of Edith’s body.

“Just so you’re aware, this is the last time we’ll let you off in exchange for your hair.”

At first, someone had suggested shaving her bald, but since that wasn’t possible with scissors, they’d cut off about half of it and called it good.

Tick was rather clever with scissors, and her hair actually looked better than it had before.

“...Thaaat’s a wrap, folks.”

Tick spoke in a pleasant-sounding voice, closing the scissors with a *snick*.

With that sound as the signal, the curtain fell on this spectatorless farce.



“All right. Returning to the original subject, then: What sort of information did the information broker want? It was something only people like us would know, correct?”

He was right. She’d still only cleared the first hurdle. If it turned out that the brothers didn’t know anything about Vino, all her determination would come to nothing.

Feeling as if she was praying, she forced the name to materialize from the depths of her throat.

“I, um, actually, I’m looking for a hitman named Vino!”

Just as she finished the yell, the guy who’d been attempting to juggle twenty pairs of scissors at the back of the room turned around.

“...You rang?”



Around the time the sun began to set, two shadows arrived at the second Genoard residence.

After they’d rung the bell several times, an elderly gentleman appeared from behind the palatial door.

“Ah. I don’t believe I have the pleasure of your acquaintance. Might I inquire...?”

In response to Benjamin’s puzzled question, the two young men—one Asian, one Irish—smiled agreeably.

“Erm, this is the Genoard residence, isn’t it?” asked the Irishman. “We have an introduction from Gregoire, the cook...”

“We came to make meals for you, that sort of thing,” the Asian visitor offered politely.

“Oh, you’re the...! Yes, yes, please, do come in.”

Obediently following the butler’s instructions, they stepped into the luxuriously decorated interior.

“It’s a butler.”

“Yeah, a textbook butler. So textbook it’s a shame he doesn’t have whiskers.”

As they conversed in low voices, the two trailed after the aged servant.

The Asian cook was Fang Lin-Shan. The Irish bartender was Jon Panel.

Up until yesterday, both had worked aboard the *Flying Pussyfoot*, a transcontinental limited express. However, because of a certain incident, the dining car had been scrapped, along with the rest of the train.

At that juncture, they’d found a temporary employer through Gregoire, the dining car’s former head cook. The initial contract was

only for the first part of January, but if they made a good impression, they might be given work at the main residence in New Jersey.

With those particulars pushing them, the two were headed into this job with definite willpower. First, they'd display their skills at dinner tonight. The impression they created with how delicious—or unappetizing—a meal they managed to make with the ingredients provided would no doubt make a world of difference.

They followed the butler, envisioning all sorts of situations, and before long, they arrived at a large door on the second floor.

“Miss, miss! The kitchen staff have arrived! Please come and greet them personally—”

But there was no response.

“Miss?”

The servant hesitated, wondering whether he should open the door. If she was only sleeping, it would be a terribly improper action for a butler to undertake.

As he was worrying over what to do, Samantha, who happened to be passing by, unceremoniously pushed the door open.

“Missy Eve, c'mon and git some yummy grub.”

Samantha went into the room with no hesitation...but Eve wasn't there.

Having registered this fact, the butler ran in as well, not caring that the room belonged to his mistress.

“M-miss?!”

He shouted in spite of himself, but there was no answer from inside the room.

The window on the far wall was wide open, its curtains flapping.

When Samantha and the butler hastily stuck their heads out, they saw a large ladder set underneath it.

“What's this?”

Fang, who'd entered after them, picked up a letter that was lying on the desk.

“L-let me see that!”

Snatching the letter away from him, the butler skimmed its contents with bloodshot eyes.

It held an apology for going out without permission and expressions of gratitude to Benjamin and Samantha for several things. Then, upon discovering a line that read, *If I haven't returned in three days*, he looked up, without reading any further.

“Miss... You can't possibly have...?”

“Oh, miss... How terribly reckless!”

Benjamin was on the sofa, his head bowed low.

Samantha's response, however, was unflappable: “Watchoo

stressin' fah? Missy Eve ain't a little 'un no more. She'll be jest fine."

"How could I possibly not worry now?! Samantha! How can you be so calm about—?"

His howl broke off abruptly as he looked up. Samantha had put on her good walking shoes and was all ready to go out. "Where are you heading off to?" he clucked.

Jon and Fang, beside her, were also headed out the door.

"First that business on the train, and now this. It's been a really noisy New Year's," Jon complained.

"No help for that," Fang replied coolly. "If the guest of honor isn't here, there's clearly no point in cooking."

Looking mystified, Samantha spoke to the butler, who was gaping at the three of them.

"We're goin' ta hunt around for Missy Eve, natch. Are you not comin' or somesuch?"

After a moment's silence, as if to rebuke himself for his foolishness, the butler shouted:

"Of course I am coming! Obviously!"

"By the by, what's that black carry y'all got in yer paw?"

Samantha was eyeing the bag Fang was holding with his right hand, and he answered, albeit awkwardly:

"This. Right. My sister gave it to me to hang on to today. She said she wanted to leave it somewhere secure, so I thought I'd ask if I could put it in your safe, but now isn't the time for that."

"Yeah, apparently it's full of a dangerous drug some corporation uses in their development processes, so she wanted to give it to somebody trustworthy."

On hearing that, Samantha thumped her chest, reliably:

"If'n that's so, then you jes' leave it with the feller we're gonna go see! It's a big ol' company, and it'll be worlds safer than t'would be 'round here!"



That night, when Henry had finished his work and was preparing to go home, a figure appeared beside him.

"Hmm? Ah, if it isn't Miss Edith. What did you need?"

Hmph. I expect she's realized her own powerlessness and has come to throw herself on my mercy. As if that would work.

"Henry, do you remember what you told me? You said information was power, and if I wanted it, I'd need power that could compensate for it."

“Yes, and that is indeed the case. Well? Did you find that power?”

“I don’t have wealth or authority, but...apparently, my personal connections are good beyond belief.”

“Pardon?”

In that instant, someone flung their arm over Henry’s shoulder.

“Evening.”

When Henry turned his head toward the voice, a young fellow was standing there. Well, he *thought* “young,” but the other guy seemed to be in his early twenties; he was probably the same age as Henry, or maybe a year older.

“E-ve-nin-g.”

The newcomer repeated the word, very deliberately, then shot Henry a cold glare.

“For somebody who wanted to see me, you sure aren’t very friendly.”

...Could it be...? —It can’t be!

“I hear you want to ask me about the train.”

Claire started out the door, dragging Henry with him.

“In that case, let’s go catch a night train. Find out what the guys who got killed were feeling through an in-person simulation. Get a good, solid feel for power.”

Henry wanted to struggle, but his arms and legs wouldn’t obey him. It felt as though a wild beast were roaring at him from point-blank range.

“You can pay in terror.”



“This is the address of the mansion where Miss Eve Genoard is currently living. We’ll figure out the rest; for now, Miss Edith, take your friend and lie low at the Gandors’ office or some similar location. We’ll settle the matter with the Runorata Family inside a week.”

At the newspaper offices, after Henry had been dragged away, Nicholas was explaining to the three Gandor brothers and Edith what would happen next.

“The president told me about your situation, Keith, Berga, Luck. We’ll communicate Gustavo’s movements to you as soon as we know what they are, so please wait in your office or at home.”

Nicholas was wearing his customer service smile, but his eyes were completely serious.

After everyone had gone, Elean spoke to him cheerfully.

“Good work there. You’re really enthusiastic about this, aren’t you? Even though we’ve been so busy lately...”

“Yes, dammit. As an information broker, I like staying as neutral

as possible. I don't want to get any more involved in this incident. This is it."

"I see. By the way, what happened to that bag?"

"It's on the move, apparently. Lia Lin-Shan's brother took the black bag and went out. No one's reported its destination yet, but we should be hearing about it any minute."

Just then, the door to the newspaper offices opened, and a group of varied ages, genders, and races entered.

"Elean! I gots a lil' favor to ask ya!"

The plump black lady held out her right hand. There was a single piece of luggage hanging from it.

When he saw that black bag, Elean murmured quietly:

"It looks like objectivity isn't an option anymore."

"...Gimme a break."



"Hold it. Did you say *Vino*?"

In a hotel room, Gustavo gave a wild cry.

"Yes. That's right, Mr. Gustavo."

"You mean the one-man-Western fella who says he's freelance, in this day and age?"

"He isn't a gunslinger or anything, but yes."

"You're saying the *Gandors* hired him?"

With an expression that seemed to say he couldn't believe it, he stubbed the cigar he'd been smoking into an ashtray.

"The thugs all over town are talking about it. The fellas from the big outfits that were here a little while back, too. They said, 'Well, that's it for you guys. Once that monster's on his tail, Gustavo won't last three days.' They were, uh, feeling sorry for us."

"Screw those jokers!"

He was bluffing with both his body and his voice, but privately, he was filled with real fear.

Vino. That terrifying hitman? What was he doing with a puny outfit like that? Gustavo had heard that his boss, Bartolo, had hired him just once. They said he'd taken out the executives of several opposing syndicates in Newark in a single night. He'd also heard he'd been paid an enormous reward; did the *Gandors* have that kind of money?

"This isn't good, Mr. Gustavo. Several of the men are starting to get jumpy."

"Dammit, dammit, *damn him*! Send out our hitmen! Clip him before he clips us!"

"We can't. All our cleaners work directly under Don Bartolo. If

we're going to borrow them, it would be faster to borrow some explosives."

"Then use freelancers or mercenaries! Anything! Find them! Get me people who won't piss themselves when they hear that name! If they rub him out, their rep in the underworld will shoot sky-high; there must be tons of guys who want that! Find me gonzo hatchet men like that! While you're at it, set bounties on the Gandor bosses' heads! Right now, *do it now!*"

"“Their rep will shoot sky-high”? Sure, maybe if this really were the Wild West. Mr. Gustavo's finally lost it."

Even as Gustavo's men grumbled, they reluctantly obeyed his orders.

And so the rumor about Vino became solid information.

That information spread quietly—and steadily—through the underworld.



I managed to get out of the house, but how am I going to find the Gandors?

Eve had chosen clothes that were easy to move in before she left, but even so, they exuded an air of luxury, and they were catching the attention of the people around her right and left.

Although the sun was long down, the neighborhood of Grand Central Station was just as crowded and raucous as it had been in the daytime.

It's probably best to ask the people at that information brokerage.

On that thought, she tried to hail a taxi and head for Chinatown, but—

"Scuse me. Are you Eve Genoard?"

Hearing a voice behind her, she turned. A timid-looking young man stood there. He couldn't have been called well-dressed by any standard, and when he stood next to Eve, the contrast was almost comical.

Although she felt a little bewildered, Eve nodded.

"I'm, uh, my name's Roy. Roy Maddock. Erm, there was something I wanted to ask you about, and, um, that's why I stopped you... Is that okay?"

"Me? What could it be?"

"Well, it's about your family."

Immediately, the girl's expression changed.

Yesss! That reaction has to mean I nailed it. Now I just need to

threaten or sweet-talk her, get her under my control somehow. Then I'll use the kid as a shield and threaten the Runoratas. If I do that—if I do that, Edith and I will both be saved! Waiting for this girl to be on her own for days on end was worth it!

Feeling certain of this, Roy grew just a little bolder as he faced Eve. In an attempt to get the advantage, he tried to use his most threatening voice, but...

“As a matter of fact, see, I know your family's secret.”

The instant after he delivered the sort of line a two-bit punk would say, Roy was taken aback by an unexpected development.

“Oh! Are you a member of the Gandors?!”

“Huh?”

“Please! Take me—take me to your leader!”

She'd cried out abruptly in firm tones, and it overwhelmed him. Roy's thoughts were thrown into complete confusion.

Why had the Gandors' name suddenly come up *here*?

Could he still be in the middle of some drug-induced delusion?

Struck by this surreal feeling, all Roy could do was stand there, looking rattled.

Not good, Edith. Edith, what do I do...?



“It's a lie! It can't be—my grandfather and father can't have done a thing like that! They can't...!”

“Please, I'm begging you, please calm down.”

Eve had gotten all worked up, and Roy—who also looked as if he was about to cry—was desperately trying to soothe her.

He'd taken her to a nearby restaurant and, to start with, had explained his own situation. Apparently, this girl didn't know anything, and all she'd done was frantically plead her family's innocence. If she didn't know, he'd have to keep her in custody and trick the Runoratas.

Looking at the girl, whose shoulders were quivering and whose eyes were swimming with tears, Roy knew that he was absolutely hopeless scum. There'd been no need to go out of his way to report her past, but he'd told her and had plunged a little girl—who, unlike him, had both hopes and a future—into the depths of unhappiness. Hadn't there been a better way to tell her? If he'd been clever about it, couldn't he have tricked her all the way to the end, so that they were both happy when they parted ways?

However, Roy's brain just didn't seem capable of finding that method.

It's the drugs. It has to be because I did too many drugs. It all felt so

great; it was like my brain was melting, so I bet it actually did melt. A weird liquid came out of my ears that one time. I guess that was my brain. Dammit, dammit, dammit, if I've gotten this dumb, will I really be able to run away with Edith? Dammit, dammit, dammit, no wonder she called me an idiot hundreds and hundreds of times. I really am an idiot.

As impatience and annoyance with himself swirled and coiled, Roy desperately kept trying to calm the girl before him.

However, there was something he'd kept to himself, just one thing he hadn't told her about.

It was the fact that her father and oldest brother had been killed by the Runorata Family. At first, he'd planned to tell her only that they'd been cooperating with the Runoratas. If she had refused to help him, *then* he would have told her, in order to plant a hatred of the Runoratas in her. But now he was really glad he hadn't done it.

However, if he let slip the secret, she might help him.

But I'd hate that. If I did that, I'd be way worse than just a dope addict. How am I supposed to tell her a thing like that when I'm sober? The only way anybody could do that is if they were gowed-up on drugs, or an actual devil.

After about an hour, Eve finally calmed down.

As she regained her composure, she spoke to Roy, her eyes uneasy. "I'm sorry for having gotten upset."

"Huh? Oh, uh, yeah. Sorry. Forget what I just said, if you can. Oh, but, no, if you do that, I'll die. What do I do...?"

Roy was startled by the difference between now and a few moments before, but he struggled to calm down.

"May I ask you something?"

"What?"

"My father and older brother passed away in an accident a little while ago. Um, could that have been—?"

"No, no way! I, uh, don't think so. See, the guy at the information brokerage said they'd taken advantage of their accidental deaths to take over!"

"Did they...?"

The expression of relief that appeared on the girl's face plunged him into self-loathing again.

He'd lied.

But he had the feeling that he mustn't sacrifice any more of this girl's future.

For that matter, using her name and threatening the Runoratas would also be stealing her future.

If things went wrong—or no, even if they went right for him—she would probably be killed.

In that case, the Runoratas' weakness will be gone, and my friends and

family will get—

...Huh?

It finally hit him: He'd never had a shot at a complete win with this strategy in the first place.

That information-selling bastard...!

Just as hopeless anger welled up inside him, Eve abruptly said to him:

"I accept your offer."

"Huh?"

"In exchange, I have a favor to ask."

On hearing the word *favor*, Roy's vision went dark. However, he knew with certainty that he couldn't afford to turn her down at this point.

"Please take me to the Gandors, right away."



"See? This is the Gandors' office."

In an alley just off Mulberry Street, Eve and Roy were standing in front of a posted paper sign that read TEMPORARILY CLOSED FOR REMODELING.

Edith had taken him to this jazz hall several times, and he knew the Gandors' office was in the basement.

"I can't afford to run into them, so go on in by yourself. I'll wait for you here."

"All right. Um, thank you very much."

"Nah, none of that. Please don't say stuff like that to me."

He shook his head, looking seriously wretched.

Just then:

Creeeak...

The door with the sign suddenly opened, and the sound of creaking metal fittings echoed in the alley.

Roy and Eve were so startled their hearts nearly stopped. Slowly, they turned to look at the door.

"Oh. Did you need something? I'm sorry. Unfortunately, it looks as though Tick's the only one here at the moment."

A beautiful woman who was nearing thirty stood there. She was slender, with short golden hair. Her transparent skin made her look rather like a doll, and she seemed fragile, as though she might break if you hugged her hard.

She appeared to be smiling faintly, but she didn't seem like a very

expressive person.

“U-uh, we wanted to meet Mr. Gandor, so we, um...”

“There are three people named Gandor here. Five, if you count me and my sister-in-law.”

Bewildered by what this elegant woman had said, both Roy and Eve asked:

“Um, who are you?”

The woman answered quietly.

“My name is Kate. I am the wife of the oldest brother...Keith Gandor.”



When Keith and the others returned to the office, Tick was by himself, cutting intricate pictures out of paper.

“Ah, welcome baaack.”

Unfolding a picture of a tommy gun that he'd snipped out with his scissors, he told Keith about the guest.

“Listen, a minute ago, Miz Kate stopped by. When I said you were out, she went back home.”

On hearing that, Keith's eyebrows twitched.

“Oh, you did say you'd go home for a bit today, didn't you?”

“Hey, weren't you too busy at work to spend last New Year's with her, too?”

“.....”

Shaking his head slightly, Keith hung his coat and hat on the wall.

Apparently, he wouldn't be able to make it home tonight, either.

“Well, I suppose this really isn't the time for that.”

“Claire's sure taking his sweet time. Don't tell me he actually hopped a night train...”

“This is Claire. It's possible.”

“Come to think of it, he was weirdly gung-ho about that. Said he had something to ask the information broker, too.”

Claire was generally pretty detached, but this time, his face had clearly shone. It was the way he looked when he'd hit on a fun idea.

“Ah, you know, he was saying something about the girl he'd proposed to. It's probably that, isn't it?”



“Okay. Got anything else you want to ask?”

Claire sat down on the roof of the night train, addressing Henry, who lay flat on his back beside him.

Henry's face had gone a sickly white, and his wide-open eyes were cloudy, like the eyes of a dead fish.

"If not, then it's my turn. You're giving that Edith woman information, so I think you should slip that much info my way, too. That okay?"

In response to Claire's question, Henry nodded several times. He looked exhausted.

"Props for not having passed out yet. I guess you've got a bit of a spine. So, about those questions. One is, I want the lowdown about a certain girl. The other is—"

On top of the moving train, Claire told him about the information he wanted, eyes wide and cheerful.



"Is that for real?"

Late at night on New Year's Day, in the same hotel room, Gustavo was grilling a subordinate.

"There's no doubt about it. That Roy guy made contact with Eve Genoard, then took her to the Gandors' office. We thought we'd nab 'em there, but a dame came out of the office, and they got into her car and left. We had several guys following them in another car, but they went into a house outside the territory."

"You blockhead! Why didn't you plug 'im when he went onto the Gandors' turf?!"

"I'm really sorry, sir. We thought it would be better to see where they went."

"Hah! And if they'd given us the slip, that'd be it! If we're just gonna ice the guy, who gives a rip about what's in the background?!"

"B-besides, Mr. Begg said to take him alive."

At the mention of Begg's name, Gustavo's face turned bright red.

"Nobody cares what that formaldehyde-pickled bastard said! Right? Who's your boss, huh?! Go on, say it! Say it right now!"

"Well, Mr. Bartolo Runorata, of course."

"Rgkh?!"

The man's unexpected counterattack left Gustavo at a loss for words. He'd expected to hear his own name, but getting Bartolo's instead was a problem. A number of his subordinates were in the room—if he flew into a rage over this, they might see it as disloyalty toward the Don.

"...That's right. And Don Runorata left this territory to me. That means my orders are absolute!"

I dodged that one well. That was what he thought, but to the people around him, it had only sounded like a lame excuse.

“I...don’t...know...about...that.”

Begg, who’d apparently come in at some point, snorted at Gustavo’s yell.

“Why, you...”

“Bartolo...left...everything...about...the...drugs...under...m-my...control. In other...words, my...orders...regarding...the...drugs...are...also...abso...lute.”

Begg chuckled, and Gustavo clicked his tongue, sending a sharp glare his way. “Don’t think things are gonna go your way forever.”

His eyes held a fierce light, one that could have been either hatred or murderous intent.

“Nothing...has...ever...gone...my...way. All...right: Do...take...him...alive, if you...would.”

As if he had nothing else in particular to say, Begg headed for the door.

“Oh, yes. ‘Formal...dehyde...pickled...bastard...was...good. Considering...I don’t rot, it’s...fairly...accurate.’”



Keith, the oldest Gandor, lived in a detached house in West Manhattan, on the edge of Hell’s Kitchen. Up until the previous year, he’d lived with his brothers in several rented rooms in a nearby tenement, but when Berga had gotten married, they’d each moved into places of their own. At present, only Luck was still living in the old apartment.

“Please, do help yourselves. I was planning to eat with my husband, but really, it sounds as though he’s too busy to make it.”

“I, uh, I will. Thanks.”

Roy, who hadn’t had a decent meal in several days, started to shovel what was probably a New Year’s celebration dinner into his mouth.

The spread included fish *amandine*, spicy Italian seasonings, and lamb steak so tender it could be bitten through easily. Although Eve held back at first, even she gradually began to reach for things all over the table.

“...It’s delicious.”

Eve, who’d been silent until then, murmured her thoughts aloud. It was a pure comment she made, with no falsehood about it, but her overall feelings were rather more complicated.

Kate, the woman in front of her, really didn’t look like the wife of a mafia boss. However, if the lady said she was, there was no help for it. It was likely—no, almost certain—that she was related to the people who’d killed Eve’s brother Dallas. Eve really had no idea how

she should act in her presence.

"That's wonderful. I wouldn't have known what to do if you hadn't liked it."

Kate smiled softly. It was a kind expression, but there was something ethereal about the woman, a misty sort of atmosphere.

"By the way, about what we were discussing earlier..."

To disguise her conflicted feelings, Eve attempted to move the conversation forward. She'd been asking about Keith and the others a few moments ago, and apparently, Keith had had plans to celebrate the New Year here, in this house. However, something sudden had come up, and he hadn't been able to return home.

"Um, do you know when we might be able to meet him?"

"Let's see. Things always do seem to come up abruptly for him, so... He's dealing with a little trouble right now, but once that's over, he should make it home every day."

"There's trouble?"

"I don't know much about it, either. He never talks about his work at home... And I think, because of that, he's trying not to come back any more than he has to, right now."

When Kate talked about her absent husband, her voice held a mixture of happiness and loneliness.

"Um... He is a mafia professional, isn't he?"

Splurt. On hearing what Eve said, Roy spit out a little black tea.

"E-Eve. You can't just say stuff like—"

"Hmm? But..."

As Kate watched their exchange, she only smiled quietly. "Yes. Although officially, he manages a jazz hall."

Maybe she'd taken a liking to the pair, because Kate began to tell them just a little about her husband's work:

"His father was the one who started the organization. The father was a member of another syndicate, and the boss of that syndicate abruptly said he'd cede some territory to one of his executives. It was a rather suspicious offer, but the executive—my husband's father—accepted gladly. Then, immediately afterward, he got pulled into a tremendous dispute, and before he knew what was happening, the territory shrank. That territory was right on the border of other, larger syndicates that were jostling each other, you see. The former boss knew it was going to happen, but for appearances' sake, he couldn't simply run, so he gave the territory to my husband's father, who knew nothing about it. He just took the money he'd earned up to that point and made his getaway... Apparently, that's how it went."

After Roy and Eve had finished eating, as she cleared away the dishes, she spoke almost as if she were telling them about her own memories.

“Still, even if it was small, it’s amazing that he managed to preserve the organization at all under those circumstances. From what I hear, Keith’s father was an old-fashioned sort, and he said, ‘I can’t lose the outfit my boss gave me.’ In the end, the strain of worrying took its toll on him, and he died young, but the brothers took up his cause, and they’re still protecting that area together. That’s what he told me. So you see, even now, they’re constantly having trouble. Even I have almost been killed twice.”

“Why did you marry someone that dangerous?”

She knew it was a rude question, but she couldn’t help it; she had to ask. Kate’s bearing also made it seem as though Eve would be forgiven even if she did ask.

Having carried most of the dishes to the kitchen, Kate sat down at a small organ in a corner of the room.

Then, after she’d gazed at the pair’s faces for a short while, her slim fingers began to glide over the keys.

The sounds that echoed from the organ accurately reflected Roy’s and Eve’s hearts.

At first, the melody seemed to symbolize unease and doubt, but as they listened to it and changed from it, it gradually transformed along with them.

The performance lasted about five minutes. During that time, Roy’s and Eve’s fears were neatly wiped away, and the end of the melody impressed them with its truly pretty harmony.

As the recital ended, they both applauded involuntarily.

“Awesome, seriously, that was great.”

“You weren’t looking at any sheet music... Did you improvise that?”

In response to Eve’s question, the woman nodded. Her expression hadn’t changed.

In 1927, the world’s movie market was monopolized by silent films.

These comedies and tragedies were shown without audio, and organ accompanists hired by the movie theaters played melodies to go with them, sometimes using sheet music, sometimes improvising to suit the images. At the time, this was mainstream.

As an organ player employed by a major movie theater, Kate had improvised all sorts of music, sometimes matching the type of audience or the day’s weather, providing the best possible melody for each situation.

However, that year, the silent-movie era came to an end.

The cause was Vitaphone, a recording system developed by a

major movie company: in other words, the appearance of “talkies.” The system had been created the year before, and starting with *Don Juan*, it was made more practical, little by little, until finally it sparked a revolution for the movie industry.

That year, the world’s first feature-length talking movie, *The Jazz Singer*, opened and became news all across America. The movie theater that employed Kate decided to show it as well, and it caused such a commotion that there were lines for several days before the screening.

Kate was there, too, in the milling crowd.

It wasn’t because she was looking forward to the talkie system or to the songs from the film’s lead, Al Jolson. It was because, if these talkies became popular, she and others like her would lose their jobs.

Kate thought that in the end, recorded music wouldn’t be able to hold a candle to live sound. She thought it could never beat the sound of their performances. She went to the theater to scoff at it, to clear away her own unease.

She took a seat and quietly waited for the movie to begin.

Ordinarily, someone would have been seated at the organ, but now there was a black cloth draped over it.

No matter what sort of songs they were, no matter what sort of music it was, they absolutely couldn’t lose. They couldn’t afford to.

If the music in this film was truly wonderful, she’d make music that was even better.

Then the movie began.

What sort of music would play? Would it begin with a song instead?

However, even when the picture started to move, there was absolutely no sound.

Had there been a malfunction? The moment she thought this, the lead actor, Al Jolson, appeared onscreen.

So it would be a song. As Kate listened closely, with undisguised hostility, the first sound echoed through the theater.

It came from the audience on the screen...*and it was the noise of a storm of applause.*

The next thing she knew, Kate was crying.

They got us.

It was a sound she’d never expected. She could have called it an attention-grabbing stunt, and that might have been all it was. However, Kate knew: This was a sound she and the others couldn’t make. The self that had thought her songs and music could win, and the self that had been planning to scoff, seemed hopelessly petty to

her. She even felt they had been insulting to other accompanists.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute—”

As the first tears fell from the corners of her eyes, the first lines played, as spoken audio.

Those lines, which would become famous around the world, shattered her heart.

“You ain’t heard nothin’ yet.”

She didn’t remember much of what happened after that. Lots of the subsequent lines were written intertitles, anyway, but as far as Kate was concerned, this was trivial, and the audience seemed moved by Jolson’s songs.

Afterward, movie theaters across the country scrambled to show—and keep on showing—movies with the talkie system, and films that had been created to be silent were hastily converted into talking movies.

Like the others, she wound up unemployed, and she drifted through various jobs.

One day, a strange man approached her.

He didn’t say anything, and his bearing marked him as someone who was clearly not an honest citizen.

At first, she had no idea what he wanted to say, but then, quietly, he spoke.

“What movie theater do I need to go to, to hear you play now? At the movies they show these days, you can’t see the performers’ faces, so I can’t tell who’s who.”

Initially, she thought he was teasing her, but this odd man said he’d always come to the theater because he’d wanted to hear her play.

He said nothing else, staying thoroughly reticent.

Before long, she found out that he was one of the Gandor Family’s bosses, and she gradually started to take an interest in the way he lived.

As Kate learned about this man called Keith and the world he inhabited, she began to think she’d like to play music for him.

After all, he was practically a silent movie himself.

When the conversation turned to Keith, Kate grew talkative. In contrast, she didn’t want to say much about herself.

The recital had been designed to dodge Eve’s question, and apparently, it had distracted them nicely.

The young girl who’d said, *I want to speak with the Gandor boss*, and the man who’d brought her, saying, *I don’t want to meet them, or, uh, actually, I really can’t*.

To Kate, they both looked as if they were dealing with special

circumstances of some sort. Eve's thoughts seemed to hold a mixture of hope and unease. The feelings in Roy's expression were complicated: It was as though he was afraid of something but still had a task to accomplish.

The only thing she was sure of was that neither was a bad person. As far as she was concerned, that was enough, and there was no need to probe further.

"Will the two of you be going home now?"

At that question, the pair looked at each other. Roy didn't think Edith would be looking for him, and he had no place to go home to anymore. For Eve's part, she knew that if she went home now, they'd probably never let her outside again.

Seeing their faces, Kate smiled gently.

"You can stay the night. Try stopping by the office again tomorrow evening."



The newspaper offices, late at night.

Nicholas was sitting in the chief editor's chair, smoking a cigarette and quietly staring into space.

How many years has it been since I took this job?

Nicholas had originally belonged to the military's intelligence division, but he'd left the army, joined this newspaper, and risen rapidly to his current position. He'd taught the company's Asian employees how to handle guns and had built up the information brokerage's military might until it equaled the power of the surrounding syndicates.

Not yet. Something's still missing.

As long as he was in the business of selling information, no matter how well he fortified himself with equipment, he could never be free of the anxiety that preyed on him. That was what it meant to be an information broker.

Handling information meant simultaneously being forced to dance by that information. Nicholas's experiences in the intelligence division had fixed that fact all too firmly in his mind.

Sure, information is power. It's not power anyone can monopolize, though. It's just like the weather: You can predict it, but you can't control it. If Henry would just figure that out...

As he was thinking these things, the door to the editorial department crept open.

"Henry!"

From beyond the door, a young man with a bloodless complexion appeared.

“Hey, buddy, stay with me. You alive?”

The man was on the verge of toppling over, and Nicholas hastily caught him in his arms; Henry’s eyes were wide open, and his whole body was trembling.

It was as if something were rampaging around in the cores of his bones. His eyes were unfocused, and the only sound that struck Nicholas’s ears was his harsh breathing.

“Dammit... Vino, you bastard. That was going way too far.”

Complaining to someone in absentia, he checked to make sure Henry’s life wasn’t in danger.

“I hope you’ve wised up a bit, after getting into a scrape that ugly.”

Even as Henry heard his voice, his consciousness was thinning rapidly.

However, just before he passed out, his lips opened slightly. Possibly because his mind was cloudy, the words he murmured under his breath sounded delirious.

“I’m the one who got this news..... This information...this power...is mine...”

Henry went quiet after that. Peering into his face, Nicholas muttered, “For the love of... See, this is why selling information isn’t decent work.”



COLLAPSE

January 2, 1932 Noon The speakeasy Alveare

The unlicensed bar run by the Martillo Family.

During the day, it was transformed into a lunch hall where the syndicate members gathered, and lots of executives and rank-and-file members were there today as well.

Intending to fill his belly before he opened his illegal casino, Firo Prochainezo went in through the thick door.

Once he was inside, the sight in front of him was a bit different than usual.

The round tables that should have been in the center of the room had been pushed to the side, creating a large open space in the middle.

“...What’re you doing?”

A man in a tuxedo and a woman in a dress were there, on their knees, lining something up on the floor for dear life.

“Shh! Softly, softly! They’ll fall!”

“Yes, they’ll fall!”

“Huh?”

The objects they were setting up on the floor were thin and rectangular. They looked like flattened mahjong tiles, but with dicelike dot patterns on the wide sides. When he saw that, Firo finally realized what they were. He remembered they’d bought the things at the general store the other day and that there’d been a mountain of them in Ennis’s car.

“Huh. Domino tiles. Why are you lining them up on the floor?”

Firo watched them curiously, but the pair—Isaac Dian and Miria Harvent—kept setting up tiles, seemingly unconcerned. The two were Firo’s friends, and they’d been freeloading at the speakeasy for the past few days.

“To knock them down, I suppose,” Isaac pontificated.

“Yes, to knock them over!” Miria added.

“Huh?” Firo had no idea what was going on. “Why would you line them up just to knock them down? What’s the point?”

“That’s a tough question. If I had to say, it’s because the dominos are there!”

“We’re dominers! Dominists!”

“Don’t talk like a mountaineer. Maiza, what are they doing with those things?”

A bespectacled man seated at the counter answered Firo’s question: “It’s a game that’s popular among children. They often play it when they don’t understand the rules of dominos.”

“Oh, I see... Except, um, you guys are in the way.”

Firo just wanted to eat lunch, and he didn’t care about this either way. The seats at the counter were already full, so, with no help for it, he decided to head for a table in the rear... However.

“Huh? Hey, the dominos go all the way to the back.”

In the back, around the corner of the counter, several people were already crouched down.

“Pezzo and Randy, you, too? Seriously, what are you doing?”

“Well, see, we knocked a few over, and it turns out it’s fun.”

“I did this all the time when I was a kid.”

Behind the two executives, two women were lining up dominos, their faces serious.

“Lia and Ennis!”

“This is fun.”

“Oh, Firo. Won’t you come help?”

There were lots of little white headstones farther back, already lined up, creating a geometric pattern on the floor.

“I came to eat...”

“Firo. You’re in the way.”

“If you’re not gonna help, then move it.”

When he looked to the side, even two of the upper-level executives had joined in.

“Ronny, Yaguruma...”

“I tell you what, when I was a boy, I did this with *shogi* tiles all the time. It’ll improve your concentration. C’mon, you try it, too. Think of it as training.”

“No way. If any of the guys from the other syndicates see us like this, we’re through.”

Appalled, Firo covered his face with a hand. Ronny, who was lining up dominos with abnormal rapidity, said to him:

“It’s all right. If that happens, I’ll get rid of them.”

“Please don’t say scary stuff with such a serious face.”

Should he consider this situation pathetic, or be happy that the days were so peaceful? Firo’s head started to ache, and he decided to keep waiting for a counter seat to open up.

“By the way, that pattern’s unbelievable. Who designed it? It can’t have been Isaac and Miria.”

At that, the eyes of everyone in the place went to one man.

“...I like this sort of thing.”

“Maizaaaaaaa!”



At the same time

“You’re sure about that?”

Gustavo, his face expressionless, was confirming a report from one of his men.

“Yes, it was the same bag, no question. When we got up close, it had the scratches we used to mark it, in the exact same spots.”

“I see.”

Saying nothing more, Gustavo leaned back in his chair and drew a deep breath.

Last night, after Roy had started to act, one of his subordinates had checked out the house he’d been watching, just in case. Then, a short while after Roy had made his move, an Asian and a white guy had visited the house. He’d seen that they had the black bag, so he’d stayed there and watched for a while.

After that, a group led by a fat black woman had appeared from the gate, and the woman had been carrying a familiar black bag in her right hand.

The group’s destination had been even stranger.

He’d followed them and had ended up...at the information brokerage, the *Daily Days* newspaper.

Since then, they hadn’t left the building.

“What the hell is going on?”

The house Roy had been watching was the Genoard family’s second residence.

Then he’d made contact with the Genoards’ daughter, Eve. Not only that, but since he’d been watching the place, it had been inevitable, not a coincidence.

Roy was after the Genoards’ daughter. If there was a possibility, it was that the girl knew about the Genoards’ shadow business, and he was planning to use that in an attempt to cut a deal with them.

...But Roy shouldn’t have known about the Genoards. He really couldn’t imagine that a mere dope-addicted punk would know something like that.

Technically, the trail should have gone cold, but when he thought of what had happened afterward, all the pieces fell into place.

The woman who’d come out of the Genoard house had taken the black bag to the info dealers’.

Then, after making contact, Eve and Roy had headed for the Gandors' hideout.

Wouldja look at that. It's simple. It's real damn simple.

Gustavo picked up a marble ashtray, held it in both hands, and *twisted it to pieces.*

Crushing the shards of granite that crumbled off the broken edges in his fist, Gustavo murmured softly, his expression calm:

"Gandors, information broker, Roy, Genoards."

He was a fighter, and as his eyes returned to what they'd been in his prime, he slowly got up from his chair.

"So they were all in cahoots, huh?"



"And? Are they here? The freelance hatchet men."

"Y-yessir. They're all in the same room."

Cringing, one of Gustavo's subordinates answered him. The man was clearly different from who he'd been yesterday; he had an air about him similar to when he clawed his way up to become a Runorata executive under his own steam. If anyone ticked him off now, they'd probably get their neck broken on the spot.

"The same room? Are people who'd let the other guys see their faces gonna be any good in a fight?"

"I think it means they're just that confident. Our fellas are in there, too, to make sure they don't take each other out."

"I see."

Without any particularly strong feelings, he threw open the door to the room.

"Hello!" called a friendly female voice. "You must be the boss, huh, amigo?!"

"....."

No sooner had the door opened than Gustavo heard a young woman's lively welcome.

A smiling brown-skinned woman was resting her elbows on the table in the center of the room. The word *artless* suited that smile very well, and she might actually have been under twenty. She seemed to be Mexican, and she was dressed in the sort of outfit mariachi bands wore in her home country. At her hips, she wore two small Japanese *katana*, although there was no telling how she'd gotten them into the hotel.

Beside the woman, a man holding a whiskey bottle slumped in a chair. He was drinking his whiskey straight from the bottle, never

stopping to pour it into a glass. In contrast with the woman, his face was dour, and his age clearly wasn't under fifty.

"....."

Opposite the old man stood a young guy. His hands were empty. He was wearing an abnormally long coat, and sharp eyes peered out from under the hat he'd pulled down low on his head.

Aside from them, there were no other new people; all the rest of the faces were his subordinates' familiar ones.

Gustavo grabbed the neck of the underling next to him and hauled him up close to the ceiling, using just one arm.

"I told you to get me *hitmen*, didn't I? Why the hell would you scout buskers in Central Park? If you've got the air to make excuses, lemme hear 'em."

"Mugaw, gwaaah, thass, th-th-there aren't a-a-a-any decent, s-s-solo, f-f-fffreelance hit—! Men ar-r-r-round these d-d-d-days!"

"Don't give me excuses."

"—Aaaaaaaah!"

Just then, the girl who'd been sitting on the other side of the table made a move.

From what he saw out of the corner of his eye, it looked as though she'd disappeared.

By the time Gustavo glanced over that way, a silver, stick-shaped object had flashed out from under the table. The Mexican girl had ducked underneath it, drawing her long blade as she went.

On seeing its tip, which had stopped just before it hit the base of his throat, Gustavo narrowed his eyes slightly.

"No fighting, 'kay, amigo? If we're tough, you've got nothing to complain about. Right? Amigo?"

"Does your family usually turn their swords on amigos?"

With a calm, sarcastic mutter, Gustavo dropped his subordinate onto the floor.

"That's not what that was, amigo. My buddy Murasámia moved all on its own. The kid just doesn't know how to behave!"

"Murasámia" must have been the name of the *katana*. Sheathing the sword, she smacked its scabbard lightly.

"...As a person, you're excruciating, but you do seem to have skills."

"Was that a compliment? Thanks, amigo!"

"At the very least, I have no intention whatsoever of being your friend. Never call me that again."

The girl's movements had been superhuman, but the others didn't seem particularly impressed.

"Hunh. I guess it's safe to assume they've got some guts."

"N-no, there's one more on the way."

The subordinate, who'd been coughing for a while, finally managed to regain his voice and inform Gustavo that someone hadn't arrived yet.

"Who is it? I don't need any small fry."

Just as the man was about to tell him the name, the door to the room opened, and a drab man with very thick glasses appeared. His face looked as if it could have been young, but the whiskers around his mouth made it impossible to tell his age. Without showing the slightest confusion at the atmosphere in the place, the man spoke, his bland voice echoing in the room.

"I'm flattered you went to the trouble of calling me, but..."

The bearded, bespectacled man looked at Gustavo's subordinate and ducked his head in a bow.

"I've got a previous engagement, so I can't take a hit contract."

Confronted with this abrupt conversation, no one in the room seemed able to process the situation.

"W-wait, please! Mr. Felix!"

Felix. The instant they heard that name, the atmosphere in the room changed dramatically.

The hitmen's eyes went round, and a stir ran through Gustavo's subordinates. The old man with the whiskey bottle hadn't even looked over at the earlier commotion, but the moment he heard that name, he capped his bottle.

Gustavo scowled openly, freezing right where he was.

Felix? "Handyman" Felix, the one people said was equal to Vino or even better? He'd heard he lived somewhere in Manhattan; they'd managed to contact him?

"Once the job I'm signed up for is over, I can do anything you want, but I really can't double-book, you know. If you had any other kind of job, I could take that. Anything from kidnapping to helping you move."

On that note, the man turned to leave, but Gustavo called to his back, imperiously.

"Wait. Don't you want to try fighting Vino? If you kill him, that'll prove which of you was stronger, once and for all, right?"

"I'm not interested. 'The strongest'... I'm not a kid. That title doesn't make me happy."

"Then you don't feel like going toe to toe with him?"

"The only people I kill without a contract are the ones who try to kill me. May I go?"

So no matter how I struggle, it's useless, huh? That was what he thought, but then he remembered the words the other man had said a minute ago, and he decided to ask one more question.

"Hold up, just a minute. You said you did kidnappings, too. Could

I hire you for one of those, right now?"

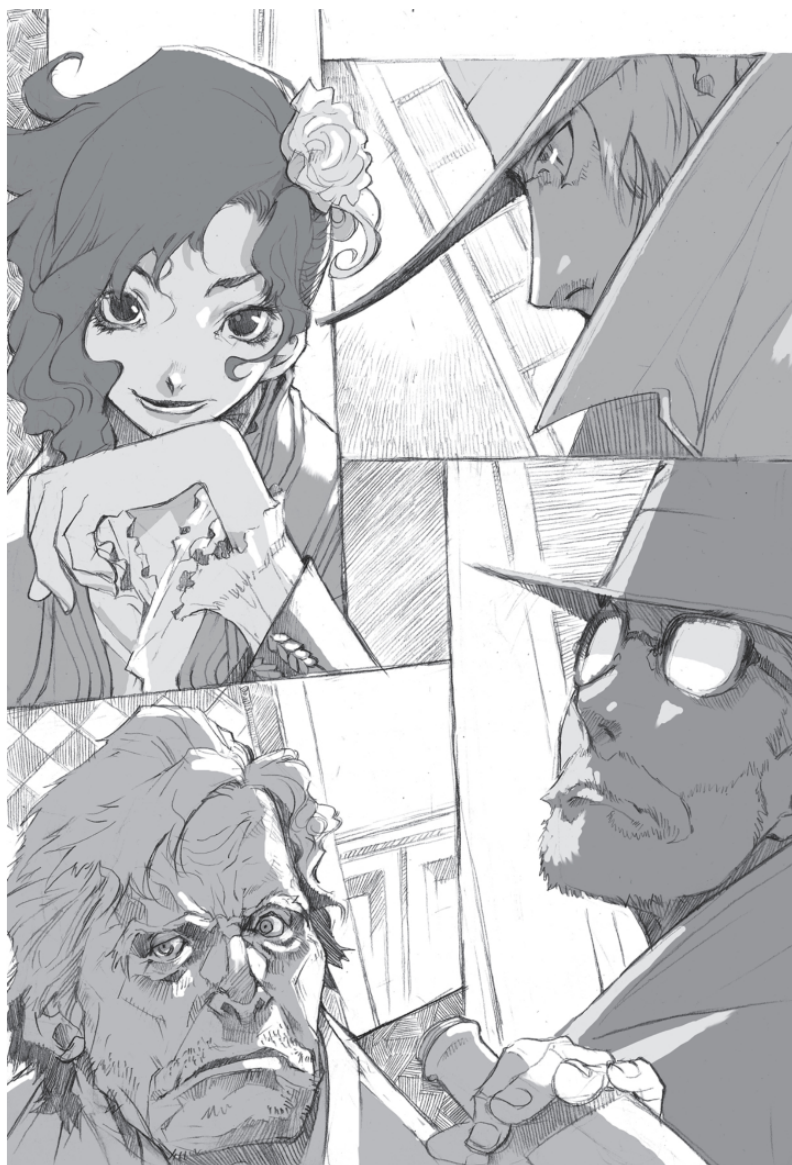
The man with the whiskers and glasses thought for a little while, then turned back to face him.

"That'd be fine."

"I'll pay any amount you want. I need to know if you can nab a couple, a guy and a girl, from Hell's Kitchen without letting fellas from the other territories catch on. Guys from other syndicates are keeping an eye on things, and we can't make a move ourselves."

The guy called a handyman responded without even asking for details:

"Let's talk rates."



After the Handyman had left, Gustavo issued instructions to the assembled group.

“All right, we’ve got about twenty people here. I want our hatchet *professionals* to stay out of things until Vino shows up. Even if he doesn’t turn up at the place we’re raiding today, if we put the screws on the Gandor men, we’ll find out where he is. If he’s skipped out on us, you’ll get to write that you’re tougher than Vino on your résumés. On the other hand, if you want to run, go ahead... Of course, you’re getting all your pay *after* the job, and we might shoot you in the back.”

Apparently, from the way he’d loaded the word *professionals* with sarcasm, Gustavo didn’t completely trust the others.

Moving swiftly on, he distributed orders to his own subordinates.

“...So. They’ve done a real number on us, and that’s a fact. But it ends now.”

Shutting his shotgun into its instrument case, Gustavo slammed a hand down onto the desk.

“We’re settling this today. The first blood we’re gonna spill belongs to the rotten journos at the *Daily Days*, the guys who bias all their reports in the Gandors’ favor. Pour their blood into their rotary presses and make tomorrow’s morning edition a flashy, all-red one! Every last copy!”

As the intimidating group walked down the corridor, one man stood in their path.

“Where...are...you...go...ing?”

Begg was watching them suspiciously. Gustavo warped his mouth into a smile, spitting out the words:

“Just you try and stop us.”

He saw Begg’s eyebrows come together slightly, and for the first time, he felt he’d gotten the advantage over the man.

Of course, to Gustavo, something like that was trivial now.



“Yes, I understand... Right. Yes, we’ll be able to move immediately as well.”

In the basement of the jazz hall, Luck was taking a phone call.

“Ah? A girl about fifteen years old? No, she hasn’t been here.”

Luck hung up the phone, then turned to Keith and Berga. He was frowning slightly. “The plan has been moved up a day. It sounds as

though they're about to launch an attack on the *Daily Days*."

"Hah! Bring it on! That just means they'll run outta life a day sooner!"

"....."

"Good grief. If everything had gone well, we wouldn't have needed to go to the mattresses, and it would all have been over tomorrow." Luck looked tired, but his mouth suddenly twisted as if he was happy, and he laughed a little. "Well, you know. The matter of the drugs aside, there's the betting parlor, the gambling den, the speakeasy, Nicola's wound, and the pain from my slit throat. Let's make sure they compensate us properly for those."

Stowing handguns and knives in their jackets, the three pulled on thin coats.

Finally, Luck picked up the receiver one more time, placed a call, said only, "Medical exam starting at two o'clock," then hung up.

"All right, Tick," he continued a moment later, "keep an eye on things for us here, if you would. When Claire comes back, tell him, 'The party's starting at the *Daily Days* newspaper offices.'"

"Yessir. Be careful, okaaay?"

Waving at Tick, who watched them go while looking concerned, the three Gandor brothers climbed the office stairs.

"Geez, though, where'd Claire get off to?" Berga asked.

"There's no help for that," Luck sighed. "We told him this was happening tomorrow, and he isn't the type to stand by just because he's been told to."

"....."

"Well, if Claire doesn't come...we'll just have to work harder."



I think the pain in my heart has subsided just a little.

Having finished helping with the washing-up after lunch, Eve was now sitting with Roy in a room at Keith's house.

"What are you gonna do next?"

In answer to Roy's question, Eve simply shook her head. The look in her eyes said, *I don't know*.

"I set aside the hysterics and thought about it all night, and it doesn't look like there's much you can do here. Since we know that, you should probably go back home. I mean, yeah, I brought you here, but you can see Miz Kate anytime you want now, y'know? So, really, for now, just go home."

Maybe he's right. When I look at Kate, I can't believe that Keith's a very bad person. Maybe the people at the information brokerage made a mistake. In that case— In that case, Dallas might still be alive.

That meant she couldn't cause any more trouble for everyone else. It might be better to go back to Benjamin and Samantha.

"Right. You can tell 'em I dragged you over here. I'm skipping town anyway, so it's not like tacking on a kidnapping charge is going to do much damage."

"I really couldn't do that."

That's right. I'll hurry home. I'll go back to Benjamin and Samantha for now, and then we can come visit Kate, have her take us to meet Keith, and hear his side of the story...

And then we'll go look for Dallas.

Forming that resolution, she stood up, intending to go tell Kate.

However, just then, the door burst open to reveal a man they didn't know.

"Uh, you're Miss Eve and Mr. Roy, correct?"

Slowly, the man walked up to the bewildered pair.

"I need you to come with me."

"H-hey, who're you? Miz Kate... What did you do to Miz Kate?!"

Ignoring Roy's words, the man closed the distance in the blink of an eye and sank a sharp punch into his solar plexus.

"Beg pardon. I'm in a hurry."

"*Gahk...*"

"Roy!"

Hastily, Eve tried to run to him, and the man—the Handyman—gave her a little smile.

"You ran over here, not away. I'm impressed. Good girl."

After seeing that reaction, he jabbed a revolver into Roy's unconscious back.

"It's great when hostages work. Relax; I didn't hurt Kate. It looks like she went out to do some shopping, that's all."

Making Eve get up slowly, the man slung Roy over his shoulder and walked out of the room, as bold as brass.

"So I'm to take you to the *Daily Days*, hmm? I guess we should hurry."



At the offices of the *Daily Days* newspaper, the site of the final showdown, various forces were converging:

The usual editorial department din had vanished, and everyone carried out their work in silence.

All sorts of people had gathered in the president's office: several newspaper executives; Benjamin's group, who'd spent the night at the newspaper; Edith, who'd returned after searching for Roy until morning with no success; and the president, sitting on the other side

of the documents. Rather than being guests of honor, all were involved in the incident.

When they'd finished summarizing the affair, Benjamin had taken a swing at Henry. Jon and Fang had desperately held him back, and while they were doing that, Henry had gotten decked by Samantha.

After that heartwarming incident, a slightly troublesome bit of information came in.

"Well, we've received word from our mole, and it sounds as though Gustavo's men are going to raid this place at two o'clock today. That's one hour from now."

As the president spoke, his voice sounded mildly troubled. However, Nicholas seemed entertained in his response.

"Will we be counterattacking?"

"About that... I've decided to leave that to the Gandors this time."

The answer left Nicholas vaguely disappointed.

"It was a request from Keith, you see. In principle, we should protect our neutral position and wipe them out personally, but this time, this information brokerage itself has become part of the incident."

In contrast to Nicholas, the president's voice grew cheerful and lively.

"Since we're directly involved, we've no choice but to view the affair subjectively. In that case, let's throw ourselves into the course of action we think is right. As an aside, my current, personal opinion is —"

After a slight pause, the president stated, clear and proud:

"—I want to rid this town of Gustavo's irritating mug... What about the rest of you?"

No one argued. Benjamin quietly muttered, "These people are insane," but that was all.

"Just as the incident last year revolved around the liquor, we—in other words, these offices—are the focus of the current incident. If the conditions are all in place—or no, rather, precisely *because* they are all in place—Gustavo and the others are on their way here. All the information has accumulated. Now we simply have to wait for this drift of information to tangle and crumble away. Until that happens, I intend to do everything I can."

Saying something that sounded as though he might be talking to himself, the president telephoned the Gandors' office.

"Now then, in the meantime, I'd like all of you to evacuate underground through the sewers. They're connected to the basement of police headquarters, so if it comes down to it, you can run there."

Just before his phone call to Luck went through, he issued a

special order to Nicholas and Elean.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d take materials with you when you evacuate. The *Daily Days* does not suspend publication. We’ll be printing the usual number of copies tomorrow, so act with that in mind, please.”



“We did it!”

“Yes, it’s done!”

By the time the sun had begun to dip slightly toward the west, a geometric design had appeared on the floor of Alveare.

When Isaac finished setting up the last domino, everyone in the place cheered and applauded.

“Shh! Wait a minute!”

“Wait a minute!”

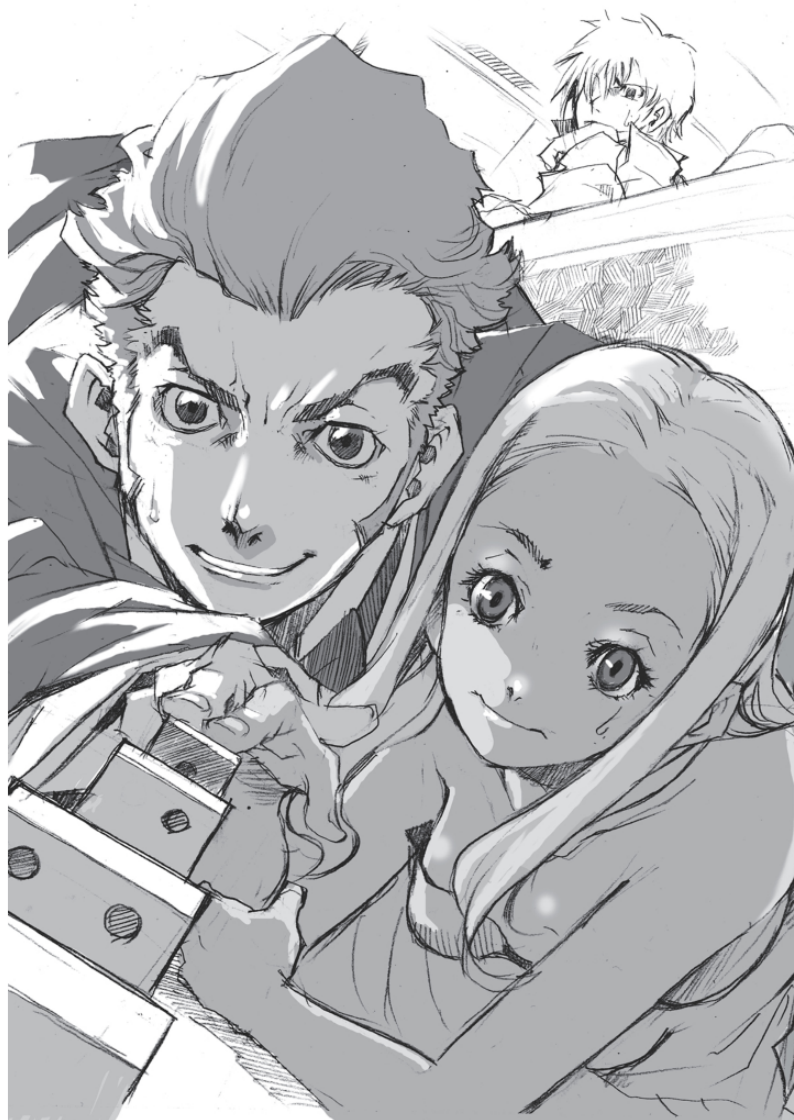
Putting their index fingers to their lips, the two checked the surrounding cheers.

“You ain’t seen...”

“...nothin’ yet!”

In the midst of a hush, Isaac and Miria put their hands together, one on top of the other, and—

—slowly pushed the first domino over.





Gustavo's vicious kick broke the double doors down.

The hinges popped off, and the reinforced glass smashed on the floor of the newspaper offices.

Opening fire right away would only make the cops get there faster. First they'd go in with a few men, take the man at the desk—or the guy who'd helped his subordinates, Nicholas—hostage, then barricade themselves in the reception room and open their attack from two fronts, inside and out. That was the strategy Gustavo had come up with, but...

The plan had gone wrong right at the start: The ordinary entrance was locked, and they hadn't been able to get inside the usual way.

"Move."

Shoving his bewildered men aside, Gustavo stood in front of the doors.

Then, without breaking into a run, he broke down the heavy doors, hinges and all, with a front kick.

According to the report, all the employees, both reporters and editorial staff, had guns. Gustavo immediately ducked behind the pillar beside the door, but there was no response from inside.

Several men charged in with weapons at the ready, but as before, nothing happened.

There wasn't a sound from the editorial department. Documents were still strewn over the desks, just as they'd been before. Only...the people were gone.

"...They split?"

He called out the guy who'd been standing guard, grabbed his collar, and hauled him in close.

"What's going on?"

"I-I—I don't know! It doesn't look like anybody slipped out the back, and nobody left through the front!"

"Nobody?"

He released the man's collar and considered the riddle.

"You're telling me none of the journos went outside?"

That was actually weirder. The door had been locked, too; it was almost as if they'd known they were coming—or, no, they'd probably predicted that. In that case, had they made a run for it?

"...Turn the second and third floors inside out, too. If nobody's there, we'll torch this place, then head for the Gandors' office."

Biting off the end of a cigar, he gave orders to his men as he struck a match.

They probably did run. From what I heard, they sounded like fighters, but I guess they're smarter than I thought... Not that I'll let 'em go, though.

"Grab anything that looks like it might get us their addresses. We'll torture 'em all later."

Cracking the knuckles on both hands, Gustavo headed up to the second floor himself.



Right about then, one guard had been posted outside the newspaper's front entrance, and there was another at the back door. The guard at the back entrance was watching the area as if he was bored when the hitman in the long coat spoke to him.

"Your boss ain't playing with a full deck."

The Mexican girl and the drunk had gone inside with the others, but this man was waiting outside on his own.

"Maybe this place is on the edge of Chinatown, but even so. He's planning to blaze away with guns right in the middle of town, in broad daylight? Seriously?"

"That's the kind of guy he is. Forget that—you sure you shouldn't be inside?"

"Not like this. If the cops showed up and nabbed us, I'd never be able to talk my way out of it."

With that, he showed him just a little of the inside of his long coat. When the guard saw its contents, he gulped. Close to ten handguns and rifles were hanging inside, and that was only what he could see.

"This coat alone weighs sixty pounds. Frankly, I want to just hurry and ice Vino and go home. If I get the job done in three minutes, I'll be able to make tracks before the cops get here."

"You're short a few marbles yourself."

"If there's any sane guy in this business, I'd like to see 'im."

Just then, they noticed several shapes approaching the back door.

"Good work."

The Handyman spoke indifferently and, threatening Roy and Eve with a handgun, made to go through the door.

"Ain't that right? Huh, Felix? We always had a few screws loose. Ain't that the truth? Our heads are always full of crazy, and we do this job because we just can't get enough of it. Right?"

The Handyman spat out his response to Long Coat. "I wouldn't talk about *sane* or *crazy* too much if I were you."

"Hunh?"

“It’s just...lame.”

For a moment, the guy in the trench coat looked stunned, but after he’d watched the Handyman go, he started to follow him into the building.

“Huh? You’re going in after all?” asked the guard.

“I’m not that great a shot. Since that’s so, when it comes to bullets, I always fight with quantity.”

Taking a handgun out of his coat, he gave an ominous smile. His veins were bulging.

“So, see, if we start a firefight here, and I blow that poser away, I can just say it was a stray bullet. Ha-ha-ha.”

The man’s eyes held a ferocious hatred, and all the guard could do was watch him go. After the door closed, he muttered just one thing into the alley:

“Sane, crazy, who cares? All I know for sure is, they’re idiots and morons, every last one.”



“What’s this, what’s this, what’s this?”

Having evacuated through the basement, Elean was keeping an eye on things from the roof of a nearby building—until something he’d seen through his binoculars made his eyes go wide.

“...We may have a bit of a situation on our hands.”

Turning to Benjamin and the others standing behind him, he broke out in a cold sweat as he said:

“They’re taking Miss Eve and somebody else into the building.”

At those words, the butler gave a mute scream. Samantha snatched the binoculars away and looked for herself. “He i’n’t jiving! It’s Missy Eve and some young feller!”

“L-let me see those.” Edith grabbed the binoculars away. Through their lenses, she recognized some familiar clothes. “Roy!”

By the time any of them tried to stop her, it was too late: Edith had dashed off toward the stairs she’d just climbed up.



“Oh, how pretty...”

As she watched the falling dominos, Ennis’s voice floated up involuntarily.

The dominos were colored on one side, and as the carpet of tiles fell, their hues changed magnificently.

“Transforming dominos, huh?” Firo muttered. “It’s kind of a kick

to see the colors change all at once like that.”



They hadn't found anyone on the second floor either, and before they knew it, Gustavo and his men had all gathered in a big room on the third floor.

It seemed to be a storeroom of sorts; several desks and chairs were clustered haphazardly in a corner.

“Dammit! So they did run, huh?”

As Gustavo muttered in irritation, he heard the door shut behind him.

When he and the others turned to look, a fox-eyed man was standing there. He spoke, revealing a pair of empty hands—

“Excellent work, gentlemen.”

When they saw him, confusion appeared on several faces.

“Who the hell're you?” Gustavo demanded.

At those words, it was the fox-eyed man's turn to look startled. “Good lord. You don't even know the faces of the people you're picking a fight with! ...To think we had an incompetent like you riding our tail. That's really pitiful.”

“What?”

Before Gustavo could get mad, the meaning of the words unsettled him.

His men were staring, eyes round, and he shot them a look that asked, *Who is this guy?*

And then he knew.

“Th-that's not possible! You're dead! B-back then, in front of that used bookstore— Your throat got—”

“Cut, yes. Yes, it did. Well, that doesn't matter; I came to talk to you today. All three of us came to you, together, personally. I hope we can expect a sincere answer from you, Mr. Gustavo.”

With those words as the signal, two more shapes appeared in the room. Both had materialized before the others were aware of it, one from the shadow of the curtains, the other from the darkness by the mountain of piled-up desks... Although it was possible they'd been there the whole time.

“You... I'm pretty sure this ain't it, but are you the Gandor brothers?” With a look as if he were seeing aliens, Gustavo took his shotgun out of his coat. “And whaddaya mean, you came to talk?”

“Well, it's quite straightforward, really. At this point, Mr. Gustavo, you don't matter.” Ignoring the big man, Luck addressed the dozen or so people behind him: “It's a simple offer. Would you come over to our side? That's all.”

Those outrageous words left everyone in the room, except for the Gandors, speechless.

“Just answer yes or no. That’s easy, isn’t it?”

Regaining their composure little by little, the men started to snicker.

“Are you an idiot? Like that would ever—”

Interrupting Gustavo’s laugh, Luck spoke again.

“We’ve come to an agreement with Mr. Bartolo.”

This time, all eyes focused on Luck.

“What...are you talking about?”

“Mr. Gustavo, it sounds as though you’ve done quite a number of things when your boss wasn’t looking.”

“.....”

“Little things. You know. When you dealt drugs on our turf, you created two layers of middlemen and took protection money from both, without reporting it to Mr. Bartolo.”

Using this system, first he’d sell to his pet dealers at the wholesale prices he’d reported to Bartolo. Then, instead of putting the drugs directly on the market, he’d have them distributed to dealers in the lower tier, and at that point the retail prices doubled. Then Gustavo would quietly absorb a good percentage of the profit.

On being informed of that fact, Gustavo and the handful of his men who’d been aware of it began to look agitated. When they saw this, the people around them started to mutter.

“Settle down! He ain’t got proof! This guy’s just bluffing!”

“We’re getting the proof now, as we speak.”

“What?”

“We were waiting for all your forces to assemble here. In the meantime, our men are taking control of your drug dens. It’s a suppression maneuver.”

The mutter grew louder. As if launching an additional blow, Luck delivered the coup de grâce. He’d been intentionally spreading rumors around town for the past several days in preparation for this moment.

“Anyone who sides with us here will be free to go afterward. If you’d like to join our outfit, we’ll welcome you, and Mr. Bartolo says that no subordinates who return to his organization will be punished, either. On the other hand, if you stay and become our enemies—”

Luck paused for a moment, smiling thinly and narrowing his already vulpine eyes.

“—all such persons will immediately become targets for Vino.”

The muttering stopped, and the men looked at one another. They were clearly torn.

Seeing this, Gustavo, his face expressionless, grabbed a nearby underling and hauled him up.

“What are you hesitating for?”

“Yeee...!”

Lifting the man by the head with one hand, he slammed his face into the floor.

There was a very unpleasant noise. Even an amateur could have seen that the bones of his face were broken.

“Your options are kill all the witnesses today, or die by my hand right now. Ain’t that right?”

“Violent, violent... Your men will hate you, you know.”

Not looking the least bit disturbed by that taunt, Gustavo kept the people around him pinned with his gaze alone.

“Well, for now, we’ll kill you three here.”

Even as he spoke, he took a step toward Luck.

“This after I told you we’d come to talk? We haven’t even drawn our guns.”

“Because if you used a gun, you’d bring the cops down on us. That goes for both of us.”

“True.”

“In other words, the first guy to draw his piece loses.”

“I suppose those would be the rules, yes.”

Laughing self-deprecatingly, Gustavo spoke with a brisk smile:

“I lose.”

A roar. A tremendous impact split the room, and a red spray of blood drifted in front of Gustavo.

Luck’s head had been blown off, and his unbalanced body slammed into the wall.

“You fellas are next. Draw. I’ll give you that much time.”

Saying a line that felt a bit dated, he turned the shotgun’s muzzle on Keith.

Berga, his face expressionless, walked over to Luck’s body and looked down at the surface of his little brother’s neck, as if he was waiting for something.

“Hunh. Taking your time saying good-bye?”

Gustavo snorted and began to walk toward Keith, but at the sound of the trembling voice of one of his men, he stopped.

“Mr. Gustavo, w-wait—”

“What, you want me to kill you first that bad?”

“No! Look! Look!”

The voice sounded as if it was at its wits’ end, and turning back, he saw quite a sight.

The situation was incredibly abnormal.

He was arrested by a strange sensation, as though he were

watching the film *A Trip to the Moon*.

Without a sound, it had begun to gather where Luck's head should have been.

Like prey being carried back to an anthill, bright-red fragments of flesh, white bone, and whitish-pink brain were coming together. Muscle and bone took shape, and teeth and eyes settled into place within them, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

"What...the...?" Gustavo felt his throat rapidly going dry. Desperately, he tried to swallow down saliva, but his throat only squeezed tight.

"Hey. Wake up." Luck's head had completely regained its former shape, and Berga gently poked it with his toe.

"Nn..." As if he'd been asleep, Luck stretched hugely.

Berga and Keith watched him as though this was perfectly normal.

"I thought so. My instincts really are getting dull. To think I couldn't even avoid a thing like that..."

Getting up as though nothing had happened, Luck turned to his speechless audience and began to persuade them again.

"All right. What are you going to do? Will you join us, or would you rather die here?"

A movie monster made real had completely stolen the souls of Gustavo's underlings.

However, only Gustavo's *men* had been rendered mentally incapable of fighting.

A golden shadow leaped from the group and passed by Luck, and in its wake, a silver streak swept through his arm.

"Gkh..."

The sleeve of Luck's suit slipped off, and a red line ran across his arm.

He hastily grabbed the arm with his other one and held it in place; if he'd been a moment later, it would have fallen to the floor.

As she watched the red line rapidly disappear, the Mexican girl whistled.

"That's an interesting body you've got there, amigo!"

He'd had no time to avoid that attack. If she came at him again, he still wasn't sure he'd be able to parry it.

Even as he narrowed his eyes at the unexpected ambush, Luck managed to keep calm and speak:

"If you want to be friends, miss, why not join our side?"

At those words, the girl gave a brilliant smile and shook her head.

"No can do, amigo. If I did that, I might not get to meet Vino! If I keep slicing you up here, though, I'll meet him for sure, right?"

So that was what this was. It made sense to Luck.

He'd been expecting Gustavo to call in some outside help, but he

hadn't thought there were any contract killers like this, aside from Claire.

When he took a closer look, one other person seemed relatively calm: a man with a small liquor bottle near the back of the group... Although, technically, he might just have been drunk.

As if to strike an additional blow, someone else came in through the door.

"Sorry to interrupt when you're busy."

A whiskered man with glasses entered, bringing a man and woman with him.

The woman was still young enough to call a girl; the guy was pretty young, too, and he looked unhealthy. Luck and Keith didn't recognize either of them.

A man wearing a long coat followed them in. His eyes were filled with hate, and for some reason, his gaze was fixed on the bearded man.

"Here you go: Eve Genoard and Roy Maddock."

Gustavo felt certain that the appearance of the Handyman had turned the tables for him, and composure returned to his face.

"Thanks, Handyman. That's a huge help."

"Well then, I'll be going."

"Hold it. About your next job... It ain't a hit. How about tying up this bunch so tight they can't move? Is that something you'd do?"

In answer to Gustavo's question, the man shrugged.

"Of course I *can*, but...?"

Gustavo smirked. In contrast, Luck and the others were watching the bearded, bespectacled man, looking mystified.

"Okay then, take care of that, Felix Walken! How much will it run me?"

"Thirty quadrillion dollars."

".....Hunh?"

The amount was one he'd never even heard of. Were his ears playing tricks on him or something?

"If I'm going to make enemies of those three, I'll need about that much money. Ha-ha."

As he spoke, the Handyman shooed Eve and Roy out into the corridor, telling them, "Hide, go hide."

"Hey, what's the big idea?!"

"Well, my job was just to bring them here, you know."

Berga, who'd been silently watching the exchange, looked disgusted. "Whaddaya doing in that getup?" he muttered.

"Getup?!"

Ignoring Gustavo's instant confusion, the Mexican girl spoke to Luck, swinging her *katana* around.

“Say, where’s Vino? Hurry up and call him, amigo!”

In response to her voice, the bespectacled, whiskered kidnapper lifted a hand.

“You rang?”

The whole room froze.

The Handyman took off his glasses and ripped the false beard away from his mouth.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow.”

The face of the man who stood there, rubbing his cheeks, was young.

Spreading his arms wide, he greeted the people around him briefly:

“Hello. I’m Felix Walken—aka Vino. Or Rail Tracer is fine, too.”

During that line, his tone and attitude changed completely, and the worst possible guy touched down at the scene of the negotiations.

Clear confusion showed in Gustavo’s expression. As he understood what had happened, his face turned so red it was funny.

“Wha—? Wait, hold it! Dammit, Gandors! Was this one of your tricks, too?!”

As Gustavo screamed, Luck and the others looked at each other.

“Claire, who is this Felix person?”

“I told you Claire was dead, remember? My name is Felix Walken. More accurately, I got the original Felix Walken to sell me his identity this morning.”

“I don’t get it.”

Claire/Felix was speaking offhandedly. In contrast, Berga couldn’t hide his confusion.

“Remember what Luck said a couple days back? He said you couldn’t get married without an official identity. And I thought, ‘Y’know, he’s right.’”

Vino’s lighthearted attitude was completely at odds with the atmosphere of the room.

“So, see, last night, one of the information brokers from this place gave me info about the girl I’m looking for and the lowdown on a guy who wanted to lose his past, and I went over to negotiate with him that night. Old Felix is a good guy. Well, while we were in the middle of that, a call came in from those guys over there, saying they wanted to order a hit. So I figured I should at least go get a good look at the fellas we were fighting—whoops.”

Right in the middle of the conversation, Vino’s right hand darted out.

The hand held a small pistol, and two dry pops rang out

simultaneously.

The bullet slipped through gaps in the crowd, heading straight for one man.

Krish.

The sound, which had echoed at the same time as the gunshots, came from the old man's liquor bottle. After a moment's pause, the man crumpled to the floor.

His right hand held a smoking gun.

There was a brand-new bullet scar in the wall behind Claire. Just a little closer, and it would have nailed him right between the eyes.

Was this Vino guy a monster, like Luck?

Or rather, could this man be the monsters' *leader*?

Struck by the terror of the thought, Gustavo's men hadn't moved even when the gunshots rang out.

By now, they were no more than an audience, and Vino, imitating a certain actor, quoted a line from a famous movie:

"You ain't heard nothin' yet!"





When he saw a woman running toward him, the man who'd been guarding the back entrance hastily blocked her path.

"Move it!"

"What's with you, whore?!" The guard drew his gun, intending to threaten Edith with it, but someone caught his shoulder. "Wh-who's—? Ah! M-Mr. Begg!"

A man with a peculiar air about him spotted Edith over the guard's shoulder, then spoke, his voice rusty. "You're...Roy's...friend, aren't...you?"

Edith sensed something bottomless in the man's eyes, but she glared back, undaunted, and answered his question with an emphatic nod.

On seeing this, Begg issued an order to the guard:

"Let...her...in."



The Mexican girl, who held a *katana* at the ready, was the first to break the silence.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! That was great! You're a funny guy, amigo! You're Vino *and* Felix? So—so, wait... In other words, if I finish you off, I get the fame from both people at once?!"

"Well, yeah. I guess so." Scratching his head, Vino turned to Luck and the others, who were beside him: "So who am I supposed to kill, again?"

He'd used that movie line in an attempt to look cool, but he really couldn't sense anything like a combat atmosphere from his surroundings.

Gustavo had his shotgun leveled as he watched the situation unfold, but he was the only one, and he didn't seem to know how to proceed... Probably because, if he put his finger on the trigger, he was bound to fall prey to a bullet from Vino.

The hitman had seemed wide open back there, but even then, those skills... If Gustavo was dumb enough to move, he'd be sent to the afterlife all by himself. He knew it on instinct.

"I expect the police will be here soon, and if possible, I'd like to settle this peacefully... I mentioned that a little while ago, didn't I?" Luck asked.

"Pain in the butt," Claire muttered. "Though! The people I

brought in a minute ago? I dunno who they are, but it looks like they're Kate's guests."

"Huh?"

"I think you should probably keep 'em safe," Claire said.

On hearing those words, Luck hastened out the door. But as he was leaving, he glared at Claire: "Say that first! For the love of..."

When Claire glanced to the side, he found Keith frowning a bit at the mention of his wife's name.

Then: Just as Luck departed, Gustavo bolted for the door on the opposite side of the room.

"Hold it."

Vino tried to turn the gun on Gustavo's back, but there was a flash of silver at the edge of his vision, and the gun was knocked out of his hand. Taking advantage of that opening, Gustavo made his escape through the door.

Meanwhile, the girl who'd flippantly brandished the *katana* whistled, looking surprised.

"Nice one, amigo! I was aiming for your wrist!"

"Don't slash at your amigos."

"Sorry, this *katana* just moves on its own!"

Rebutting the comeback she'd already heard several times, the Mexican girl took some distance and repositioned her sword.

"If you can manage it, just surrender, all right? Killing amigos isn't my thing."

"Aaah! You're making fun of me because I'm a woman! You're gonna make me mad, amigo!"

No sooner had she spoken than the silver gleam became a streak, racing through the air.

Shaiiiiing.

The sound of metal scraping against metal rang out, and the blade of the *katana* stopped just before it hit Vino's neck.



"Huh? That's weird..."

In the Gandors' office, Tick cocked his head to one side, looking puzzled.

"I'm missing several pairs of those new scissors."



Huh? Why'd it stop?!

The girl's eyes had gone round, and Vino answered her

indifferently. His eyes were growing sharper and sharper.

"I don't make fun of people because they're women or kids. There are strong women out there, and I'm nuts about one of 'em."

Starting a conversation that didn't directly relate to the situation, Vino slid the scissors he was holding farther up the blade.

The *katana* was caught between the scissor blades, and she couldn't move it sideways.

"I'm actually making fun of you because you're weak."

A Japanese *katana*, stopped by scissors? Impossible; she couldn't let that happen. Even in her confusion, the attacker didn't doubt her conviction. Quickly, the Latina let go with her right hand, supporting the *katana* with her left hand alone. In the next instant, she'd gripped the hilt of her other *katana*, and no sooner had she drawn it than she tried to slash through her opponent's stomach.

Scree scree-scree-scree-screeeee...

The sound of metal on metal.

Vino had taken out another pair of shears with his left hand. He was stopping both *katana* with scissors and nothing else.

"I see. That *katana* really doesn't know how to behave."

As the four—or, more accurately, six—blades struggled with each other, a figure was taking aim at the two combatants.

The guy in the long coat had taken two shotguns out of that coat and was pointing them at Vino. At this distance, the woman would definitely fall victim to the shot as well, but as if to say that wasn't his problem, he began to squeeze the triggers.

In that instant, an immense shadow leaped in from the side.

It pressed on both of his arms, forcing the two muzzles downward.

A roar echoed through the room, and holes were gouged in the concrete floor.

The shot and ricocheting bullets chipped flesh out of the two men's legs.

"AaaaaaaAaaaaaaah!"

The guy in the long coat screamed and rolled around, but the guy who'd pushed the shotguns down—Berga—gritted his teeth and stayed on his feet.

"Ggaaah!— That *hurt*, you nutjob!"

In response to Berga's shout, the guy in the long coat screamed back, eyes filled with tears.

"AAAAaaaaAAAAwh-wh-wh-what the hell are yooooooooo?!"

Even as he rolled around, the man took a pistol out of his coat and emptied all its chambers, not even bothering to take aim. He drilled several holes in Berga's body, and blood pulsed out in jets.

The blood that fell on the floor immediately began to climb up his body again, but the guy in the coat completely failed to notice. He took out another gun right as he finished emptying the previous one, sending a constant stream of bullets into Berga.

Even then, Berga didn't fall. As he took countless bullets, he clenched his fist and swung it high, high in the air.

"StooooOOooOOop!"

As the fist bore down, making an audible noise, a rifle bullet struck it.

Flesh burst, and the bones of his fingers showed through.

Even then, the fist didn't stop, and a mass with Berga's full weight behind it sank into his face.

The guy's psycho.

That was his last thought before he blacked out.





“W-with *scissors*?!”

In the midst of the noise of metal on metal, the match came to an abrupt end.

After slashing at each other for a little while longer, the four weapons met again, and the six blades locked for a moment. The girl shifted her weight backward in a bid to get some distance, and in that instant, Vino lifted his leg higher than her head, then brought the heel of his foot down on her wrist.

“Ow!”

In spite of herself, she dropped one of the *katana*. Leg still in the air, Vino struck her other wrist with his heel.

Technically, there hadn't been enough force behind either blow to make her drop her swords, but she'd been brandishing *katana* one-handed for too long, and her grip had reached its limit.

“I guess that's it, huh?”

“Ah...”

With the air of someone finishing a game, Vino pointed the tip of his scissors at the base of her tanned throat.

Seeing that his adversary's will to fight was evaporating, Claire directed a murmur at Gustavo's subordinates, who showed no sign of moving.

“Well? What'll you do?”

At those words, several of the men stepped forward, turned toward Keith, and clicked their heels together.

“All right, then. We'll be leaving now.”

“Wha...?” At the unexpected response, Vino made an unusually dumb noise.

Keith nodded, and the lackeys left the room.

Several of the remaining men were muttering, their expressions bewildered. It was the group who'd been just as disconcerted as Gustavo when his betrayal had been pointed out earlier.

As Vino and the Mexican girl watched the men walk right out of the room, their faces held countless question marks.

“What's going on?”

In response to Vino's question, Keith was as silent as ever. But, apparently unable to just stand by and watch this, Berga piped up, sounding put-upon: “I guess we didn't tell you, huh? Half of those guys are the moles that got us that agreement with Bartolo.”

“...Seems like too many,” Claire deadpanned.

Berga shrugged. “It means the guy was just that unpopular.”

“Ah, I—see !” Coming down a little harder on the last word, Vino leaped to the side, hurling the scissors he’d held in his right hand.

It happened so fast that the girl who’d just had those scissors pointed at her froze up.

At the same time, the dry crack of a gunshot rang out.

A deadly bullet had been fired from the opposite side of the room, heading straight for Vino, who’d been keeping the woman pinned with scissors.

The bullet passed through the spot where he’d been a moment before, grazed the young woman’s hair, and buried itself in the wall.

The scissors spun, parallel with the floor, and sank into the shoulder of the guy in the long coat.

The guy in the coat was still out cold. Another man had grabbed his collar and was using him as a shield.

It was the old guy with the liquor bottle, the one they’d thought had fallen way back at the beginning. He’d hidden his slight frame in the shadow of the guy with the coat, and the white gun smoke drifting upward clung to him.

“Ha-ha!”

Giving a little laugh, Vino tumbled across the floor, throwing the other pair of scissors as a diversion, and retrieved the gun he’d dropped a little while ago.

The moment he stopped rolling, a series of gunshots echoed through the room. The bullet tracks became lines, going back and forth between them, and the air grew thick with the smell of powder smoke.

Vino avoided all the bullets by twisting his body, and the bullets fired at the old man were absorbed by his shield, the body of the man in the long coat. They might have been blocked by the large number of guns in that coat; no blood seemed to be dripping from the man inside it.

When they’d both exhausted their ammo, Vino said, sounding entertained:

“Thought so. It seemed weird to get so little pushback from you, Gramps. When I saw you at the hotel on Wall Street, you seemed like the toughest of the three.”

In response, the old man laughed a little in a low, hoarse voice.

“It looks like the rumors about you aren’t just for show, either. That’s a relief: If I kill you now, my name will—”

“Hang on a second, Gramps. It looks like the guy who hired you is all washed up. His pals abandoned him, and I seriously doubt he’ll be able to pay you. You still want to go, even so?”

“I’ve got a personal interest in Vino’s head.”

“Ah, I see.”

Cracking his neck, the young assassin produced another pair of scissors from his coat.

“Besides, even if my client is gone, I can’t very well betray him, can I?”

The old man was looking for agreement, but Vino stared at him, mystified. “Why not?”

The elder hitman seemed taken aback by this; he watched the youth on the other side of the room in amazement.

“You can just make tracks or give up,” Vino insisted. “You guys aren’t strong like I am. You’re weak, and that means if you sell someone out, there’s no help for it. That’s a natural law, see?”

“Boy... Don’t you understand? The pride of a hitman is—”

At that word, Vino began laughing as if a dam had burst.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Aaah, you crack me up! That’s hilarious! You’re a real funny guy, Gramps!”

“Why are you laughing?”

Obviously annoyed, the old man took a knife from his coat. Even when Vino saw this, he didn’t stop laughing; he only warped his expression further and kept talking.

“Honor?! Pride?! *Hitmen*, like you and me?! What a joke! You’re a comedian!”

Looking at the old man and the Mexican girl in turns, he snorted scornfully.

Stung by his attitude, the young woman glared into Vino’s eyes—and then hastily looked away.

Vino’s eyes were clearly abnormal.

The color in his eyes was completely different from what it had been before he started fighting, a shade that seemed to have devoured all darkness.

His eyes were like twin holes in his face, and they seemed as if they’d engulf the soul of anyone who looked into them. They were obviously not what they’d been a moment ago. It was as if a demon had shown its true colors.

“The second we landed in the murder business, our pride was gone! Get a clue! Once you kill even one person, you’re lower than society’s lowest scum! Is this a battlefield? If you kill people, are they gonna give you a medal? Yeah, I’m strong. If you take me down, your name will probably jump pretty high. But *that’s it*. If you betray a client, you’ll lose trust? Nobody trusts you in the first place! You’re a hitman, a *hitman*. Like there’s anybody who’d put faith in a social outcast like that?”

Here was the hitman said to be the strongest of them all, denying the art of the trade. Yet neither the old man nor the Mexican girl

could find a retort for those unfair statements.

“You get drunk on your own useless preaching, but you don’t believe in anybody. Sure, I’ll fight you. If you think I’m wrong, prove your pride or whatever it is with your strength. I’ll show you that scum is always just plain scum—”

The taunt abruptly broke off.

A single handgun, black and gleaming, had been set against the back of Vino’s head.

Feeling the muzzle through his hair, Vino murmured, without seeming particularly flustered:

“Keith.”

From behind him, his sworn brother answered that murmur.

“Don’t scoff at how folks live.”

The words Keith spoke made the most dangerous hitman close his eyes softly, and he sighed.

“These guys and you guys are fundamentally different, you know...”

“No different.” Even as he chose the fewest words possible, Keith didn’t give his hitman room to argue back. “They’re hoods...just like us.”

Seeming not to care that someone had a gun on him, Vino scratched his head lightly and turned around. As he looked into Keith’s eyes, none of the deadly light from a moment ago was visible in the reflection of his own.

“All right. I’m sorry. I forgot *you’re* a stickler for that dumb pride stuff, too.”

Contrary to his words, Vino’s—Claire’s—tone didn’t hold the slightest contempt.

Abruptly, the intent to kill ignited in Keith’s eyes, and he slipped past Claire.

There was a dull noise, and behind him, Claire sensed something fall over.

When he turned around, without any unease or doubt, he saw exactly what he’d expected to see.

The old man had crept up behind Claire and Keith while they were distracted, and Keith’s powerful kick had slammed him to the floor. Then, as if to finish him off, he stomped on him, right over his liver.

A low groan leaked out of the man’s throat, and he stopped moving.

“Hey, be nice to old people.”

Claire was laughing as he spoke. Expressionless, Keith muttered:

“.....Enemies are enemies.”

On hearing that answer, Claire grinned, satisfied.

"I dunno about the other two, but you may be cut out for the mafia after all."

"And? What'll you do, kid?"

Berga, who'd been watching, spoke to the Mexican girl, who'd retrieved her *katana*. ".....Too cool."

"Hunh?"

One of Berga's eyebrows lowered in a scowl. The Mexican girl answered his question with a question, although her eyes were still on Keith:

"Say, amigo. That promise the fox-eyed guy was talking about... Is that offer still good?"



What should I do? I lost Roy...

When the man with whiskers and glasses had told her to hide, Eve had gone down to the first floor and hidden in the reception room, but when she turned around, Roy wasn't there. Had he gone outside ahead of her, or had she left him behind?

She was reluctant to go out to look for him now. The gunshots from the third floor echoed all the way down where she was, and it felt as if she'd wandered into a talkie about a war.

She couldn't run, though. Roy had gotten pulled into this because she'd selfishly insisted on seeing the Gandors. She couldn't just hide here all by herself.

I have to find him.

When Eve was about to cautiously open the reception room door, a figure appeared in its window.

She thought it was Roy at first, but it was much too large.

Sensing danger, she backed away, and in that instant, the door was *kicked in* with a bang.

"Eeeeeeeeeek!"

With a piercing scream, Eve sank to the floor, right where she was.

The heavy door had slammed into the spot where she'd been standing a moment ago. The frosted glass that was set into the door had broken into large shards and scattered, and the doorknob had come apart into pieces that bounced and rolled across the floor.

"Pipe down, little girl."

Although the door certainly hadn't been small, the man who came in bent down to go through it.

The light had vanished from Gustavo's eyes, and his imposing presence felt inhuman.

"Here I thought things had gotten real simple, and now they're complicated again."

He shook his head dramatically, creeping closer, little by little, to where Eve sat on the floor.

"Should I say it's nice to meet you, maybe? A little Genoard girl, thinking she could set me up... You really pushed your luck, didn't you?"

Eve didn't know what he was talking about. Who in the world was this man?

All she managed to understand was that the look in his eyes wasn't right as he fixated hideous hatred on her.

"What did I ever do to you, huh? You got a chance to live normally. Why'd you have to throw your life away on something this pointless?"

The man held a shotgun in his hands, and slowly, he turned the muzzle toward Eve's face.

"Don't tell me you're a monster, too?"

Her body froze with terror. She wanted to run, but her legs wouldn't move.

Seeing this, Gustavo smiled as if he was relieved.

"I guess not. That's good to hear."

He could have just blown her head off right there, but simply killing her wouldn't be enough.

I'll kill her in front of the Gandors. Either way, I'm gonna have to kill 'em all now. There's no way in hell I'm running or dying. I'll slaughter everyone who helped set me up. Those worthless underlings, that bastard Begg, and even Don Bartolo.

Intending to crush the bones in her legs so she couldn't run off, Gustavo raised his foot high.

"This is for the speakeasy."

The voice and the impact hit him at the same time.

A dull shock ran through the back of Gustavo's head, and his huge body lurched violently.

Since he'd had one foot raised, he hadn't been able to brace himself immediately.

"The gambling den."

A second impact ran through the side of his head. It felt as if he was being struck with some sort of sharp object. The sensation was more hot than painful, like being hit directly with a blazing iron bar.

Dropping the shotgun, he put his right hand to the wound. There was a fierce pain and the skin-crawling sensation of touching raw meat with his fingers.

“The betting parlor.”

He turned back toward the voice, trying to land a blow on its owner.

However, the weapon slipped past his fist and bore down on him in a counterstrike.

It was one of the editorial department’s wooden chairs.

Its corner hit him in the face, and Gustavo felt his cheekbone break.

His torso began to keel over backward, but he managed to stay on his feet, using only the strength in his legs.

While he was in that position, the corner of the chair came down on his face again.

“Nicola’s wound.”

Once he’d fallen on his ass, Luck hit him with an insurance strike.

Holding the chair’s legs with both hands, he raised it all the way up over his back.

Then he brought it down full force, without holding back the slightest bit, onto Gustavo’s face—although the man seemed as if he might already be unconscious.

“And that’s for my blown-off head.”

All Eve could do in response to this sudden turn of events was avert her eyes.

The fox-eyed man who’d appeared from behind Gustavo was mercilessly rearranging the giant’s face.

When Gustavo had gone completely still, the man finally noticed her. Seeming a little troubled, he looked away. But then, in the next instant, he held a hand out to Eve.

“It looked as if he was going to kill you; I couldn’t help myself. It was justified defense.”

The man smiled pleasantly, but Eve truly couldn’t bring herself to thank him.

“Ah, erm, please don’t be so frightened.” Luck watched the girl in front of him with worried eyes. “Well, this is a problem. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

He’d put out a hand, intending to help her up, but she didn’t seem at all willing to take it.

If she’d been a passing stranger, he could simply have left her, but there was a reason he couldn’t do that:

“You’re a guest of my sister-in-law Kate, aren’t you? I’m, uh, her younger brother-in-law. Luck Gandor.”

At those words, he saw the girl stop trembling.

Oh, good. Hearing Kate’s name seems to have put her mind at ease.

That was what Luck thought, but the emotion in the girl's eyes wasn't relief by any means.

"Um... Are you Mr. Gandor, the...leader of the mafia professionals?"

"Mafia professionals'? That's, erm... And *leader* isn't technically... Well, I suppose it's something like that."

"Please! There's something I really...really and truly need to ask you!"

Steeling herself, the girl asked Luck a question that cut straight to the heart of the matter:

"My brother—is my brother Dallas alive?"

When Luck heard the particulars of the situation from Eve, memories of the past rose in his mind.

Dallas. Who'd have thought he'd hear that name here...

The girl had come all this way, to a place this dangerous, just to find that man, her brother. She'd known what a risk she was taking and had braced herself accordingly; that was probably why the fear had gone out of her face. That fact alone vividly illustrated the strength of her resolve.

Luck sensed that inept lies and evasions probably wouldn't work on her. Even if they did, she'd spend her whole life searching for her brother at random.

Luck, who had also steeled himself, turned intense eyes on the girl and began to tell her a few of the facts.

"Whether you believe me or not, this won't be easy for you to hear, but...your brother is no longer an ordinary human."

He told her that, one year ago, after being caught up in a certain incident, her older brother had gained an imperfect immortality that had rendered him unable to die of anything except old age; he'd gone on to use that body to kill four of Luck's comrades.

And that afterward...as a forced atonement, they'd sunk him and his friends to the bottom of the river, still alive.

At first, Eve hadn't been able to believe the part about immortal bodies, but when Luck cut his finger with a knife and she watched it regenerate, she was forced to admit that it was true.

Complicated emotions passed through her heart. Joy that her brother was alive. And at the thought that he was suffering even now, something like hatred for the man in front of her welled up inside her. However, it was probably true that her brother had killed his friends. Eve knew better than anyone that that was the sort of man he was. Even though she'd known, she hadn't been able to do anything, and she knew part of the blame for the consequences lay with her.

However, even if she understood that, there was nothing she could do about her feelings.

“Why— Why? Why must my brother keep suffering like that? Couldn’t you just have the police pass judgment on his crimes? And you still, even so... Hasn’t it been long enough? Please, my brother and his friends—please forgive them. At least give them the right to be judged by the law. I’m begging you, *please!*”

The girl in front of him was on the verge of hysteria. Luck looked down, holding absolutely still.

In a sense, what she said was right. He knew that. However, just as Eve was giving priority to her feelings, Luck had simply followed his as well. During that incident, the one who’d felt the fiercest rage among the three brothers had been Luck himself.

“I doubt you could understand our world, so I’ll tell you about what I feel, nothing more... That wouldn’t be enough to quench my anger. Not even if, in the future, they go to trial and are punished by the law. It won’t bring my dead comrades back. I did this because I can’t forgive them. That’s all it is. If you hate me, you’re welcome to do so. Hate me all you like. Just as it won’t bring your brother back, the dead won’t return, either. My pain won’t disappear.”

Luck was speaking calmly, but his emotions were on the verge of exploding. Even after all this time, his anger over the murder of his friends hadn’t abated. However, he understood what she’d said as well. It wouldn’t have been odd for an ordinary mafioso to silence her on the spot.

Maybe this was part of what Claire meant when he said Luck wasn’t suited for the mafia.

“But that’s...that’s just selfish! I don’t understand your world or your feelings. If this eases the pain in your heart, then what am I supposed to do with mine?! I only—I only want you to give my brother back!”

Her anger was justified. Luck took her words in, quietly.

“Please! You can hurt me instead, as much as you want, so please, please...”

On hearing those words, Luck hardened his expression, and his tone grew a little more forceful.

“I’ll thank you not to think that someone like you would be enough to calm my anger... Forget him. If you want to stab me or shoot me, be my guest; I’ll take it. However, let your grudge end with me. If you attempt to strike anyone else—”

Luck swallowed the rest of the sentence. *What am I saying?*

As if to demonstrate that the discussion was over, Luck shook his head and began to stand up.

“If this anger subsides, years from now...then, perhaps...”

The words didn't seem to satisfy Eve, but there was probably no help for that. He'd decided to accept it and wrap things up, when—

“_____!”

Abruptly, Eve's eyes widened in shock.

By the time he registered the shadow standing behind him, it was too late: *The reception room sofa* came down on Luck's head.

Gustavo, his face covered with blood, was wielding a sofa that was as long as he was tall.

He'd picked up the enormous sofa, which must have weighed two hundred pounds, as if it were a thin futon. One attack from it was duller than a blow from the wooden chair, but in exchange, the impact was massive.

For a moment, Luck's consciousness dimmed, and Gustavo swept his enormous weapon at him sideways.

The tremendous mass was being swung around at the same speed with which Luck had swung the wooden chair. As he took the direct attack, his body rose into the air, then flew to the side.

“Gagh...!”

Luck slammed into the wall, back first, dominated by the impact.

Somehow managing to get up, staggering on wobbly legs, he looked in Gustavo's direction.

The bloodied man was glaring at Luck with glittering eyes that held nothing but the intent to kill.

“Play me for a sucker... Every last one of you, playing me for a fucking suckerrrrrrr!” Hurling the sofa to the floor, he gave a roar that sounded like a scream.

Then, abruptly, he smiled and began to speak in broken tones —“I'll twist your head off and mash it and fry it in oil and lock it in a safe and throw it in the ocean, over and over and over.”

“It looks like he's snapped... Dammit, Berga's usually the one who handles this type.” A trickle of sweat ran down Luck's face, and he took a handgun out of his jacket. “I guess it won't be possible to settle this peacefully.”

Shaking his head, he aimed at the charging giant and pulled the trigger.

A series of gunshots rang out, and six holes opened in Gustavo's body. All of them were right on target, from his chest to his stomach, and his death should have been assured.

...But Gustavo's feet kept moving.

“Not gonna work not gonna work not gonna work *not gonna work!* Small fry like you, little shit-fish like you, you don't even get to exist when I'm around! Bullets that ain't there don't work on meeeeeAAAAaah!”

“That's insane!”

A fist sank into Luck's stomach. As he crumpled to the floor, a kick with enough force to destroy a door slammed into his face.

Luck's head was dashed against the floor, and Gustavo's enormous foot stomped down on his body, again and again.

"ScramscramscramscramscramaaAAAAaaaah!"

With an inhuman holler, he brought his foot down on Luck's ribs, crushing them to pieces.

When he saw that Luck had stopped moving, his eyes finally turned to Eve.

Eve's legs had gone weak with terror again, and Gustavo gave her a brutal smile.

"You, too, little girl. *I'll feed you to the fishes in Newark Bay, just like I did with your daddy and your brother.*"

For a moment, Eve couldn't understand what the man had said.

"What's with that look, huh? Didn't you know? Ain't that why you tried to set me up, because you knew?"

Seeing the blood drain from the girl's face, Gustavo realized that apparently, that was the truth.

"Hah! If you don't know, then lemme fill you in. Your daddy and the rest started jawing about how they were gonna stop refining drugs, so I dusted them with my own two hands! I killed your folks before I drowned 'em, but I'll turn you into fish bait slowly, while you're still alive, and drop you into the bay bit by bit."

Gustavo smiled evilly. Gradually, Eve made sense of his words. Then, when she fully understood what he meant, her heart went pure white.

In the instant when all sorts of things seemed about to burst inside her, a voice spoke. It was weak but steady.

"Quit saying pointless things, please."

Behind Gustavo, Luck's ribs had finished regenerating, and he got up.

He didn't seem to have completely recovered yet; his breathing was rough, and simply standing looked as if it hurt him. "Someone who considers himself a member of society's underbelly, bragging about murder to an honest citizen? You couldn't be more dead to shame, could you? That's why both Bartolo and your men abandoned you."

"You rotten little punk...!"

As if the words had enraged him, Gustavo ran at Luck with tremendous force, hauling him up by the shirtfront until he was close to the ceiling.

And then he threw him at Eve.

The lean man's body bounced off the floor, and his back crashed into the corner of a table that had been beside the girl.

“Even with a weapon, you couldn’t do squat. You think you can beat me bare-handed?”

Possibly because he had the advantage, Gustavo was gradually regaining his ability to make levelheaded decisions.

He didn’t need the girl anymore, either. He’d just blow them both away.

With that thought, he looked for the shotgun he’d dropped earlier, but for some reason, he didn’t see it on the floor.

Luck took that opportunity to whisper to Eve:

“I’ll draw him off, so run. Claire’s the only one who could take this monster...”

His voice trembling from the blow to his spine, he turned to look at Eve. And then—

“Oh, Eve...”

“Little giiiirl!”

Gustavo noticed it at the same time.

With a shockingly calm expression, her eyes filled with tears, the girl held the shotgun at the ready.

The gun, which seemed too big for her body, was pointed directly at Gustavo.

With her eyes fixed on their assailant, she quietly spoke to Luck. Her tone was calm, as though her real emotions had been shut away somewhere. Even as she cried, her eyes were vacant, as if she was looking at something far away.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Luck. I’m really sorry. I said all those selfish things to you a moment ago, and I thought that was the right thing for me, but even so, right now, I can’t forgive this man—I just can’t.”

An intense strength came into her eyes. They were fearless eyes, dark and clear.

“Now I understand what you said to me earlier. And so, and so—”

Big tears fell from her eyes, and she depressed the trigger.

“You damn chit! You think you can shoot a piece like that with a body like yours? That’s real funny! Bring it on! Just you try firing that thing at me! Try to kill me, try to avenge your idiot papa, you rotten little girl!”

Gustavo taunted her, and with no hesitation, the girl pulled the trigger.

There was a roar like a bomb blast, and blood sprayed through the air in the reception room.

The recoil that struck the girl’s body was much weaker than it should have been.

When Eve looked, fearfully, there was Luck, blood gushing from the place where his left arm should have been.

The arm had fallen to the floor; the shot had broken the bone, and its end was exposed.

Luck had held the barrel of the gun with his right hand, aiming it at his left arm.

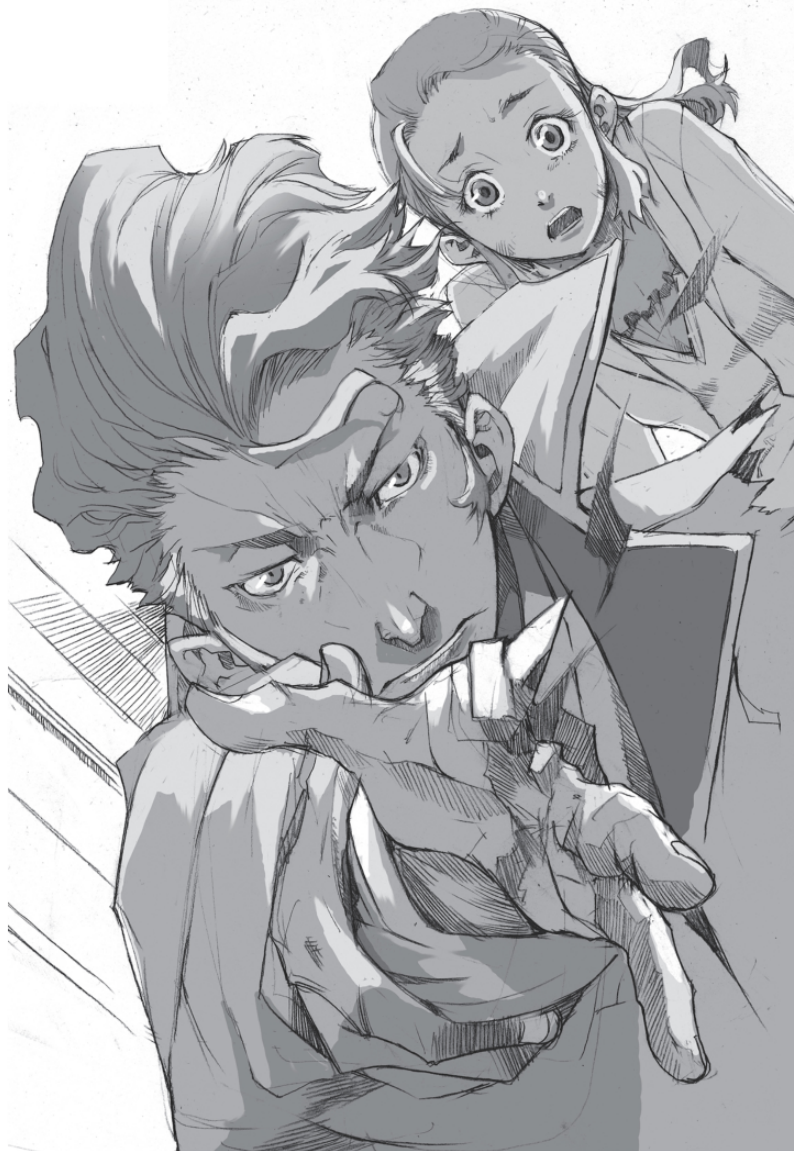
Breaking out in a greasy sweat, Luck stood in front of the girl, whose eyes were wide with astonishment.

“...I accept your pain.”

Then, turning to Gustavo—who’d frozen for a moment—he picked up his left arm and launched himself into a charge.

“You moron! Whaddaya think you’re doing?!”

As the giant clenched his fists, Luck *thrust his left arm, held in his right hand, out at him with all his might.*



The end of the broken bone slipped past the big man's fists, stabbing him in the windpipe by a small margin.

“ _____ ”

Gustavo's mouth flapped several times. Then his eyes rolled up into his head, and he keeled over backward.

After making sure that the huge body had stopped moving, Luck murmured, his eyes cold:

“And that's for my cut throat.”

Holding the wound on his left arm, he turned back to Eve.

“Are you all...righ...?”

Unable to bear the onslaught of pain, Luck passed out.



What do I do? I lost her.

Roy had meant to go hide with Eve Genoard, but while they were running away in a panic, he'd lost sight of her. Had he left her behind, somewhere along the way? Or maybe she'd run on ahead... He was pretty sure the door they'd been brought in through was just up ahead, around the corner.

However, the armed guard was still out there. Neither of them could handle him on their own.

And so, at the very least, she probably hadn't gone out that door yet.

That said, he couldn't go anywhere near that earlier room now. Starting a little while ago, he'd heard several sharp, dry sounds, and there was some sort of unpleasant metallic creaking, too.

He couldn't run, either. He'd pulled that girl into this. He really couldn't leave her.

He knew this logically, but even so, he really wanted to run. He wanted to make a break for it very badly, from the bottom of his heart.

No good. I'm such a no-good bastard. Dammit, dammit, the drugs, when I'm high, I can do such awesome things. I could do anything. That was me, and so is this, so what's up with this difference?! Dammit! I could do it before, so why can't I do it now?! That's just pathetic...

As Roy fretted, he began to hear a voice that sounded vaguely familiar.

“...y, Royyyy!”

Damn, that's Edith's voice. I'm hearing things. Knock it off, you. Do you think you can't do a blasted thing without relying on Edith or something? ...Yeah, you're right. So what?

Stop it, though. I've got to do this on my own now, all on my own—

“Roy!”

He finally came to his senses: Edith’s slap had hit him square on the cheek.

“Get ahold of yourself, you idiot!”

Edith’s slaps crossed Roy’s face again and again, back and forth. When she backhanded him, the bones on the back of her hand struck his cheekbone, and it hurt like hell.

“E-Edith!”

“You moron! Why?! Why are you so considerate of other people when you’re that timid?! ...Or that’s what I thought, anyway, and then you pull a complete stranger into this like it was nothing! I promised! At least let me keep my promise! I told you I’d save you. I told you I’d protect you. So don’t *run*!”

She straddled him, punching him, but there wasn’t much force behind it, and at the end, she hugged him tightly.

“I’m sorry. I was wrong. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry,” he offered.

Lame. I’m so lame. What’s lame? The fact that at a time like this, I can’t think of any other words to say.

Just then, an unfamiliar shape appeared behind Edith. “So... you’re...Roy, hmm?”

A sickly-looking man spoke his name, his words breaking off in small fragments.

“Wh-who’re you?”

“My...name’s...Begg. Still, you...really...are...an...or...dinary... man, aren’t...you? I...suppose...it...could...be...recoil...from...that. The...fact...that...you...showed...extraordinarily...strong...reactions.”

At first, he’d simply been intrigued. He hadn’t thought anyone would grow so bold, even if they had used his drugs. He’d been surprised that a man had been reckless enough to steal the drug—a drug that was less powerful than the ordinary, illegal types—from the Runoratas.

Maybe he’d been violent to begin with. In that case, it would have been natural for him to lose himself that badly after a small dose of uppers. On that thought, he’d asked around at the drug den the man had frequented, and the more he heard, the more interested he’d grown.

Apparently, a new type of downer whose effect would ordinarily have worn off in less than two hours had kept this Roy fellow on the other side for more than three *days*. He’d regularly had excessive reactions to other drugs Begg had compounded as well.

He didn’t know whether it was mental or physical, but with reactions like those... With reactions like those, he might be able to see what he’d been searching for.

Taking a rubber band and a syringe out of his jacket, Begg held them out to Roy.

“It’s...drugs. Shoot...this.”

Roy looked at the syringe and band that had been unexpectedly handed to him. He had no idea what was going on.

“It’s...a...stronger...version of...what...you...used...to...use...all...the...time. A drug...cocktail...I made...mixed...with...stimulants. If...you...shoot...that, you’ll...probably...never...be able...to come...back...to...this...world.”

Edith hadn’t known what he was talking about at first, but as soon as she realized what he meant, she shouted:

“What...? Hey, you! What are you thinking, out of the blue?! He couldn’t do a thing like...!”

As she stood up angrily, a gleaming black gun muzzle came to bear on her.

“Un...fortunately, you...can’t...refuse.”

“Edith!”

Roy hastily scrambled to his feet, but the man pulled Edith back toward him, then pressed the gun to her temple.

“Show...me. Let...me...see...you...die...smiling. Let...me...see...you...feel...the...world. Show me...your...pleasure. Your...world.” He set his finger on the trigger, his tone gradually growing more emphatic.

“I...I don’t get it. Why? Why?! Wha...? Have I been using stuff a crazy guy like you made?! Explain this!”

Completely ignoring his plea, Begg quietly cocked the hammer. “Do...it...now.”

Roy huffed, mouth pursing. “All right... All right, just don’t shoot Edith.”

However, unable to do anything else, he slipped the tight rubber band onto his arm. The veins bulged out right away, and an intense feeling of pressure dominated his arm from his wrist all the way to his fingertips.

“Stop, Roy! Don’t! You can’t! You’ll die!”

“Promise me—yeah, promise me! Once I—once I shoot up, you let Edith go. Promise!”

After a short pause, Begg agreed: “All...right. I...pro...mise.”

When he heard that, Roy cinched the rubber band even tighter. With no hesitation, he stabbed the syringe into his arm.

The liquid that filled the chamber was gradually pushed in, until finally it was empty.

“Roy!”

Edith screamed and tried to run to him. However, Begg wouldn’t let her go.

Rather than going back on his promise, it was as if, in his excitement, Begg had forgotten to release her. His eyes were riveted on Roy, in anticipation of the change that was about to occur in him.

"I'm sorry, Edith," Roy pleaded. "I'm really sorry. I guess I couldn't keep my promise. So, well, you know..."

Although there was no telling what he was thinking, Roy raised his hand.

"You don't have to keep your promise, either."

That was all he said before he took his left hand, the one he'd raised high in the air...

—And slammed it into the glass in the corridor window.

A sharp sound echoed in the corridor, and the window glass shattered into splinters.

Then Roy jammed his arm down onto the sharp fragments that remained in the window frame.

A large quantity of blood spurted out, spraying into the air.

"Roy! Royyyy!"

Edith screamed, and as Begg realized the intent behind his actions, confusion came into his eyes.

"You...promised. I took...that shot. After that...I'm...yeah, I'm free to do whatever, right? Right?"

As his own blood splashed back onto him, he smiled a little.

"Point...less! Did...you...think...that would...be...enough...to get all...the drugs...out of your arm?!"

"Won't know unless I try, will I?"

"That's...insane. Why? If...you're...going to...go...that...far, why...can't you...accept...the world?! If...you're...going...to die... anyway, don't...you want...to...die...in the midst...of...pleasure? To die...in your...own...world?"

Roy snorted at Begg's question, smiling with lips that were wet with blood.

"I'm the one who knows the world I saw the best. I know it real well. I've been there over and over and over, see. It felt insanely good. That's why I remember it so well."

"Then, why?"

"Yeah, I remember it clearly. That's why I don't want to go!" Glaring at Begg, who was still holding Edith, he mustered the biggest voice he could manage. It was almost like a triumphant war cry, declaring his victory. "In that world, over on that side, *there's no Edith!* That's what I remember most! So, hurry up, let her go! Please let her go!"



Dragging his arm, which was dripping with blood, he steadily approached Begg, step by step.

“Don’t—don’t break my world!”

He took the words he’d once yelled at Edith when she tried to pull him back from the world on the other side and slammed them into the world Begg wanted.

If he let Edith go now and the man died, he would probably die smiling...having denied everything about Begg’s drugs.

If he killed Edith, the man would die without any hope or happiness at all.

Either way, the result would be far from his ideal.

Fierce sadness and hatred mixed inside Begg. It felt as if everything he’d ever been had been denied. He couldn’t forgive Roy, and at the same time, he desperately wanted to save him.

Tell me, Maiza. What should I do? This feeling... Is this the “exhaustion of the soul” you mentioned? Well? Tell me. Tell me—

Shoving Edith toward Roy, Begg pointed the gun at the side of his own head.

“If...you...get...him to...the hospital now, you’ll...probably...make...it in...time. Get...out...before...I...regenerate. Other...wise...I...think...I...might...kill...you...both.”

The next instant, a small gunshot sounded in the corridor.

As if that sound had been a signal, Roy fell into deep darkness.



“I’d call that a success.”

“Yes, a huge success!”

Having toppled all the dominos, the Martillo Family was brimming over with a sense of achievement.

Several thousand domino tiles littered the floor, and the pattern they’d drawn was still faintly visible.

As the feeling of accomplishment enveloped the entire place, only Firo, who’d declined to participate in the carnival, felt oddly excluded.

Since Lia had taken part as well, his lunch still hadn’t arrived.

“I mean, it’s fine and all. I don’t care.”

While he watched Isaac and Miria dance on the carpet of tiles, flamenco-style, out of the corner of his eye, he muttered spitefully, *“So who’s going to clean all this up...?”*

But dropping his gaze to the floor, Firo noticed something.

He'd thought it was just a group of geometric designs, but there was some sort of birdlike thing depicted in the center.

"Maiza, what's that?"

The designer seemed a little embarrassed as he answered the question. "Oh, it's Phoinix."

Phoinix. He'd heard that word somewhere before, but the memory was fuzzy.

"He was one of the gods worshipped in Phoenicia. He wasn't originally shaped like a bird, but now he's classed with various sacred birds and known as the phoenix."

"Ah."

He understood *phoenix*. It was a mythological, immortal bird that threw itself into the flames and was reincarnated, over and over again.

"The two of them said they wanted me to include a phoenix, no matter what."

Overhearing those words, Isaac and Miria broke into the conversation, although they didn't stop dancing.

"It's perfect for dominos, isn't it? No matter how often you knock them down, they always get back up again!"

"Yes, and when it comes back, it's much, much prettier than it was when it flew into the fire!"

"Huh."

Firo meant to let the comment go in one ear and out the other, but their words gave him a bad feeling, and he muttered:

"Wait, don't tell me... Are you gonna do this again? Make it even more impressive than the one you just knocked down?"

"Well, of course," Isaac said.

"That's the duty of those who topple dominos!" shouted Miria.

On hearing their innocent resolution, Firo held his head and slumped facedown over the counter.

"Gimme a break..."

A phoenix, hmm?

As Maiza watched Firo, Isaac, and Miria's exchange, he smiled a little ironically.

Getting through the jaws of death again and again, then coming back even stronger: It's humanity in a nutshell.

Even if it was also immortal, it was a completely different being from the immortals.

In terms of mythology, we're like the Tower of Babel. We aim for the heights, but we're no match for the birds, and when we fall, that's the end of everything.

"Ordinary humans are much closer to gods than we are. Don't you agree, Begg?"

Knocking back the liquor in his glass, Maiza grumbled quietly to a friend who wasn't there.

January 3, 1932 The *Daily Days* newspaper

“First, Tick over at the Gandors’ got information on Gustavo’s pilfering out of the man they nabbed. In exchange for that information, I told Keith how to contact Bartolo, although I don’t know what sort of conversation they had. Then we told Miss Edith about the strategy Keith and the others were setting up, as a way to save Roy... Or, rather, we’d already been pulled in as well, and we were only following Keith’s group blindly.”

The voice from behind the documents was cheerfully giving a rough outline of the incident.

The explanation they’d railroaded through with the police regarding the affair had been that Gustavo, hopped up on drugs and deranged, had rampaged around the offices of the newspaper, which had been about to run an article on the dangers of the drugs his group was dealing.

They hadn’t had to fabricate evidence: They’d put the black bag beside Gustavo. If the police investigated the drugs they found inside it, someday the stuff the Runoratas dealt would be regulated by the law as well. There had already been incidents of assault and damage to property, so the law would handle things smoothly. The government loved frame-ups, too. All in all, the men decided that even if the truth was noticed, there wouldn’t be a problem.

“Well, I’m just glad you’re all safe. They’ll probably send Gustavo straight from the hospital to prison, so I expect it’s all right to consider this incident closed.”

Nicholas and Elean looked at each other, then asked about something that had been on their minds:

“Uh, President?”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“It seemed like the police took a lot longer to get here than we’d anticipated.”

In fact, the police had arrived roughly thirty minutes after everything was over. As a result, they’d had time to carry out the wounded and falsify the circumstances, but...

“Oh, that? Yes, yes, there was that.”

The voice that came from behind the documents sounded as if it had caught itself being careless.

“It was apparently top secret, but they held a hearing for the terrorist Huey Laforet yesterday. He was transported out of Manhattan

today, in strict secrecy, under guard. After all, in order to retake that man, there was a train robbery—you know, the *Flying Pussyfoot* incident from a few days ago. At any rate, since there was a group that had been plotting something like that, to safeguard against a possible attack from the remaining terrorists, the police had absolutely every available officer guarding that area. I'd wager that's why."

The genie of the documents spoke matter-of-factly, and Elean lobbed another question at him.

"When we were, erm, how should I put it; you know... When we'd evacuated outside. While Gustavo was on that flashy, jaw-dropping, spectacular rampage of his, where on earth were *you*, boss?"

In response to that question, the voice from behind the documents seemed to laugh a little.

"I was here the whole time."

"Huh?"

"Sir?"

"Oddly enough, people tend not to notice. Thanks to that, I got to hear the conversations in all the rooms through the speaking tubes in here."

As the two stood aghast, for an instant, they got the impression that the pile of documents itself had laughed. In closing, the magical paperman wrapped up the debriefing by saying something very unlike an information broker:

"At any rate, it's best to take great care of information one has seen and heard directly. There's no such thing as Laplace's demon in this world, no absolute intellect. No matter how much knowledge you have, in the end, you must rely on your own instincts and experience. That's how I see it."

Several days later

That day, the president, Nicholas, and the others were all out, and Henry was manning the information desk by himself.

I nearly died to get that information. I want to be the one who tells it, no matter what. I'm certain I'll be able to tell it better than the president. After all, I experienced all sorts of things directly. I feel as if I lost an assortment of other things in exchange, but there's no help for that. Information is power. In order to obtain it, a commensurate price must be paid. I still believe that, even now.

However, in the future, I think I'll avoid getting carried away.

Henry didn't worry about the fact that his hairline had turned pure white. He was itching to tell someone the information he himself had paid for.

Just then, a customer stopped in.

He was an odd young man with a tattooed face. His leg appeared to be injured; it was wrapped in bandages, and he was leaning on a cane.

The editorial department's atmosphere seemed to intimidate him, and he looked as if he might start crying from that alone.

"Welcome to our information brokerage. We sincerely appreciate your visit."

Even as the young guy looked bewildered by the overly courteous greeting, he said the words Henry most wanted to hear:

"U-um, about the, the train robbery that happened a little while ago—"

And so, today as well, information races through the streets.

Those who use information, and those made to dance by it:

In order to trick and be tricked, to flourish and fall, they steal information from each other.

As if jeering at them, this mindless power gradually grows and spreads, higher and further.

Wishing to accumulate, or to collapse and vanish.

Evolving and atrophying, over and over, as if living eternally.

Information: It resurrects again, and again, and again.

The End





RUNORATA FAMILY

On the outskirts of Newark, New Jersey

“And so?”

Under a bright, cold, clear blue sky, an elderly man stood alone on the grass.

There was a young man behind him. He'd been Gustavo's subordinate and had delivered constant reports on the situation.

“Sir. By some miracle, Gustavo is alive. We don't know what sort of weapon was used, but it seems to have missed his carotid artery. The bullets left in his body were fired by the staff in self-defense. They seem to have decided that the wound to his throat was self-inflicted while he was out of his mind.”

In response to the words from Bartolo—his true boss—the man made his report without showing the slightest nervousness.

He seemed like an entirely different person from the guy who'd cowered in front of Gustavo.

“In addition, the police seem to have begun to consider him a suspect in the Genoard murders, and we think it's only a matter of time before he's arrested. The groundwork has already been laid. We've made arrangements with the politicians, and they won't touch any of us beyond Gustavo.”

“I see.”

Giving a small nod, Bartolo looked up at the sky and murmured, as if he were talking to himself.

“Well, I suppose you could say he was lucky.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“We've had requests from other councils to hand him over for a while now. The guy did flashy things in the past. The others probably wanted to settle the score.”

He stated the bottom line in an indifferent tone, as if he were talking about the economy.

“If he'd gotten the Gandors' territory, that would have been fine. We would have put an end to the matter by handing that territory over to Manhattan's Five Families.”

“And if he’d failed, you would have given them Gustavo...?”

“As it turns out, he did fail, but if they put him in the clink, the other fellas won’t be able to get at him easily. As far as he’s concerned, it was a lucky break. That said, to compensate, I’ll have to part with some of my profits.”

Pausing for a moment, Bartolo gave an unamused smile and grumbled mildly to his underling.

“This is quite an age we’re living in. You need the approval of councils or the Commission just to bump off a man who’s sold you out or to get revenge for a follower.”

Since Luciano’s blood-soaked revolution, the mafia world had undergone a rapid transformation into a modern organization. Connections with politicians had grown stronger, and their excessively antagonistic relationships with Jewish and Irish gangs had cooled down.

The Runorata Family was continuing its operations a step removed from those waves of modernization. That said, they weren’t fighting them. Like the other syndicates, they’d chosen coexistence, and Bartolo had enough clout to force that whim through.

“Lucky Luciano’s a guy with power. However, he doesn’t personally rule as the head of the organization. Instead, he created a council, just like a politician. See, he knew if he said he was the guy at the top, he’d be setting himself up as the next target. Even so, everybody acknowledges him as the boss. Well, at the very least, it’ll be his age for a while now.”

Bartolo abruptly turned to look at his subordinate, and a hint of emotion stole into his expression. “It may be a rough age for us and the Gandor men, though. I’m looking forward to seeing how high we can go.”

When he heard those words, the subordinate looked surprised. “Then, the Gandors...”

“Establish a nonaggression pact with them. From here on out, we’ll treat them as equals, whether we become enemies or decide to coexist.”

“Even if they’ve got a contract with Vino, an outfit that size couldn’t—”

“You don’t get it, do you?”

His cold expression returned in an instant, and from behind his glasses, Bartolo scrutinized the man’s face quietly.

“In our world, it’s either one or zero. It’s a straight choice between two things: Either they’re an enemy on equal terms, or they don’t even exist. There’s no such thing as lower rank. Never think of the other guy as being less than yourselves. The second you do, they’ll start to trip you up... When it came to that, Gustavo thought the same way.

However, I see them as ones, and he saw them as zeroes. We differed there.”

Bartolo lightly raised a hand in the direction of his mansion.

He’d seen his grandchild, who was still very young, running toward him.

“By the time my grandkid’s grown, what will the Gandors be, enemies or neighbors? I’m looking forward to finding that out, too.”

As he stepped forward, to finish up, he stated his impression of the man who’d negotiated with him:

“Keith Gandor, hmm? He was a real resolute guy; quite eloquent.”



GANDOR FAMILY

January 5, 1932

Kachak.

Quietly, Keith hung the receiver back up on the wall. Then he pulled on his coat and began getting ready to leave. He was headed home for the first time in about a week, and there was a faint suggestion of a good mood about him.

“How’s Kate?” Berga asked. “Doing good?”

At the teasing, which was delivered with a grin, Keith gave a small nod and left the room.

Keith talks a lot, as long as he’s on the phone...

Whether or not he knew what Berga was thinking, Keith was as reticent as ever... Or maybe he just didn’t want to take the time to say anything.

In the Gandor Family office, their daily routine had resumed, and in the midst of it, only Luck looked gloomy. He was leaning back into the sofa.

“No drive...”

True, when they’d been working to isolate Gustavo, he’d said they wouldn’t turn away anyone who joined them.

He’d said it... But.

“Don’t do that, amigo! You can’t use scissors to cook!”

“Aww... But it tastes really good. By the way, what does *amigo* mean?”

“It means ‘friend.’”

“Yay! I’ve never had a girl call me her friend before!”

In the office’s kitchen, Tick and the Mexican girl were having a carefree conversation.

It was the first time anyone from Mexico had ever come to the office, and his men kept asking him questions, looking dubious.

“Um, Mr. Luck. That doll. What’s...?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“But...”

“Even if it bothers you, pretend you don’t care, please.”

“...Yessir.”

The men reluctantly withdrew. Watching them out of the corner of his eye, Luck sighed again.

Keith’s at fault here, too. We already have Tick; we don’t need anyone else that odd. And besides, she cut my arm off.

Well, that wasn’t *terrible*. If he thought of it in terms of having gained another skilled member, he could probably put up with it.

Claire had also grumbled, “I got way more exercise on the train...” and wandered off somewhere. He’d probably gone looking for the person he was planning to marry. As always, the guy was self-centered.

However, the most self-centered, most apathetic person anywhere... That was definitely Luck himself.

Gazing up into space, Luck Gandor recalled what had happened after the incident.



“Miss! Ohh, miss! I’m terribly sorry! You ended up in such a perilous situation, and all through my sheer incompetence!”

Eve hadn’t even been given time to apologize before apologies were heaped on *her*.

“Benjamin, Samantha, I...I—”

Smacking her very lightly on the head, Samantha smiled at her. “You thinkin’ you done wrong, don’tcha? Then it’s all gravy.”

As Eve was leaving, Luck, who’d woken up, approached her.

“Oh...” She was at a loss for words. This was the man who’d said such self-centered things and had been about to do such selfish deeds, and yet he’d saved her, even so. Her brother’s enemy.

If she’d fired the gun as she’d intended, she would probably never have been able to see Benjamin and Samantha again. This man had saved her again and again in that room, and in the end, she hadn’t been able to thank him even once.

Because in her heart, she wanted to rescue Dallas.

What expression could she possibly wear when she addressed a man like that?

But then he spoke to her, handing her a scrap of paper.

“When you think my pain is gone, pull him up or do anything you like. I leave that decision to you.”

That was all the young man with the vulpine eyes said before he turned to go.

The scrap of paper had a detailed map, with a mark over a spot in the river.

“Um! Mr. Luck!”

Thrusting a palm out toward Eve, he cut her off.

“Don’t say anything, please. Abuse or thanks, it will only irritate me.”

Then he left. As she watched him go, Eve quietly hugged the paper to her heart.



If his brothers found out he’d said a thing like that, they’d send *him* to sleep with the fishes.

More importantly, what excuse could he give his dead comrades?

Firo would probably say, *If they’re dead, who says you need to excuse yourself to them at all?* without a blush. On that point, he was far more hard-boiled than Luck.

That wouldn’t do, though. It was a common belief that anyone who ended up in this business was prepared to die. However, reality wasn’t like the books or the movies: Nobody wanted to die. When it came to that, they were no different from ordinary humans.

If there was any difference at all, it was just one thing: They were villains. That was all.

That’s right. We are villains.

He certainly hadn’t forgiven Dallas and the others, and Eve hadn’t softened his heart.

What he’d done had been nothing more than one of the calculations he was so good at.

In the end, it isn’t possible. Even if they know their location, they won’t be able to pull them up.

They’d sunk Dallas’s group in a particularly deep spot in the nearby river. If they dredged the riverbed with a crane, they might manage somehow, but as an individual, Eve probably didn’t have the power to make that happen.

All he’d done was give the girl a token consolation. As long as he told her the place, she probably wouldn’t approach him and the others again. She also wouldn’t have any reason to hold a pointless grudge. Regardless, Dallas and the other ruffians would no doubt continue to suffer.

Everything went according to plan. There’s nothing to feel gloomy about.

Even as he thought this, Luck couldn’t rid himself of the feeling

that he'd lost his drive.

If he'd never intended to let her save Dallas, he could simply have given her a map with a false location. Even if it was only a slight chance, why had he given her any chance to save that man and his cronies? The mere question of why he hadn't lied to Eve kept nagging at his heart.

As Claire had said, maybe he wasn't cut out for this business. Still, his hands were far too dirty to let him quit this late. Besides, protecting this territory was both their mission and their duty. And more than anything, they felt a sort of family pride in the business.

Conversely, that was all it was.

That might have been the whole of the world that had been given to him.

Maybe...

Luck remembered the girl's face, before and after she'd confronted Gustavo. His eyes couldn't look the way hers had anymore. Her gaze had been filled with a certain determination, a willingness to sacrifice herself for the world she believed in.

Maybe I was jealous. Jealous of the fierce, violent emotions that filled that child. That's something I'll probably never have again.

...Because I doubt I'll ever be able to "prepare to die" again. Never, not for all eternity.

With these thoughts on his mind, Luck decided to quietly lose himself in reading.



THE WEALTHY

“C’mon, let’s do it again, say, tomorrow.”

“This time you help, too, Firo!”

There were several liquor barrels in Alveare. At the moment, instead of liquor, they were packed with a vast quantity of domino tiles. That said, the barrels had been empty to begin with; the Martillos kept them around in case of a police raid.

Seated on top of those barrels, Isaac and Miria were speaking loudly, swinging their legs.

“No,” Firo tossed off, briefly. Then, sighing, he asked the pair a question. “Look, lemme ask you one more time... What’s so fun about that? You spend hours and hours setting those up, and then you shoot it all to hell in just a few minutes.”

In response, Isaac and Miria grinned like children:

“But it was fun to watch, right?”

“Yes, it was fun, wasn’t it?”

“.....Yeah, I guess.”

Firo agreed with them on that point. Although he’d razzed it to pieces as he watched, once the dominos had started to fall, he’d been so fascinated by the motion of the tiles that he’d forgotten about his empty stomach.

“Well, that’s what’s fun about it! When we knock down the tiles we set up, we have fun, of course...”

“And if the people watching have fun, too, that’s two birds with one stone!”

“In other words, we make out like bandits!”

“Yes, we have fun, and everybody watching it has fun, and then the whole town’s happy!”

As he watched the two, who looked genuinely and thoroughly delighted, Firo smiled, half in surrender.

“You’re right... When you think about it that way, it might just be the perfect game for you guys.”

It’s a whole lot like your lives, too.

That was what Firo thought, but he didn’t bother saying it aloud.

The way they live, they’re like a giant domino “main line.” They coast

along at breakneck speed, knocking down branches of tiles through all sorts of gimmicks. These two affect other people's lives all the time, the way they did with Ennis and me... Even though, as far as they're concerned, they're just barreling along any way they please.

"Fine. Next time you do it, I'll help you out... Unless I've got something better to do."

"Yesss! Now you're a fellow dominer, too, Firo!"

"Or maybe a dominist! Which do you like better?"

"...Would you please tell me the difference between those things?"

Firo groaned and held his head.

If more and more people began to act like these two, they'd probably have world peace before anyone knew what was happening. However, no matter how many people they might influence, he doubted there was anyone eccentric enough to want to be like them.

Maybe I'm overthinking that.

Smiling wryly at his delusions, Firo scooped a handful of tiles out of the barrel.



In her second residence on Millionaires' Row, Eve sat quietly at the dinner table, head bowed.

She was lost in thought, squeezing the little scrap of paper, remembering her brother and Luck.

If I rescue Dallas like this, will I have done the right thing in the end?

This was something she'd yearned for, so why was her resolution wavering?

She thought she might have hurt that man very badly with her selfish wish. However, there was no way she could stop wanting to save her brother.

What should I do? What should I have done? I...I—

"You look a bit down. Here, have something to eat and cheer up."

When she looked toward the cheerful voice, she saw that Fang, the Asian cook, had just brought out the night's meal.

"I don't know what you're worrying about, but for now, eat up. The only time people can be unconditionally happy is when they're eating good food."

"Quit with the bromides. That's irresponsible."

Beside him, Jon delivered a curt comeback.

At first, Eve hadn't been hungry, but drawn by the aroma, she brought some of the food to her mouth.

"—It's delicious. It's just as good as what Kate made!"

"Who is this Kate person?"

Ignoring Fang, who looked mystified, the butler and Samantha watched the scene happily.

Eve had been blue since the incident, but now she was smiling again, and they were as pleased as if her mood had been their own.

Seeing them, Eve was reminded of just how fortunate her circumstances were. However, it was also true that neither her father nor her brothers were here. There was no point in grieving for people who were gone... But Dallas was definitely still alive.

As she ate, Eve kept thinking about what she should do.

What could she do, personally? What could she do so that everyone—Dallas and Luck and the Gandor members—would be happy?

I was only thinking about my own happiness, wasn't I...?

When she'd thought that far, she resolved to rescue Dallas as soon as possible.

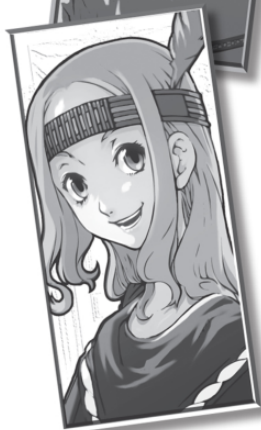
If there was nothing for it but to keep thinking, at the very least, she wanted to start working on what she could do now.

Of course. I'll...I'll try to be like those two.

Just like the two burglars who'd brought her that temporary happiness, she'd think, and keep on thinking, about what she could do for everyone else. Then, when she decided to act, she wouldn't hesitate. She'd try to make sure that happiness—her own or other people's—didn't slip through her fingers again.

As she remembered the pair of thieves, she banished the hesitation from her heart.

Resolved, Eve squeezed the scrap of paper to her chest, tightly, ever so tightly.



BEGG

August 2002 Somewhere in New Jersey

“Begg.”

Maiza called the man’s name for the first time in several decades, but there was no response. Begg only stayed where he was, curled up in the corner of a room in a certain hospital. He was muttering something to himself, and he showed no interest in anything else.

“They say that’s how he’s been for decades... I hear he’s been like that ever since Mr. Bartolo Runorata died of old age, about thirty years back. Do you know him? He was, uh, a famous mafia don in these parts.”

“I knew of him, yes.”

Bartolo Runorata. Maiza had never met him personally, but he was famous among people in his profession. He had been Begg’s boss, and the one person Begg had trusted, aside from his old companions.

The last time Maiza had seen Begg, Bartolo had still ruled his syndicate.

He didn’t know what had happened, but after a certain point, Begg had completely lost his spirit. He’d simply gone on compounding drugs in accordance with Bartolo’s instructions, with an expression that made him look as if he had no hope left.

His loyalty to his master had seemed to be his one refuge, and Maiza had worried about what would happen to him after Bartolo died, but...

“Begg. Do you remember me?”

He spoke to him again, but Begg didn’t even look his way.

The nurse was watching Maiza as if he interested him greatly, but Maiza asked him a question without seeming to care.

“How are his hospital expenses being dealt with?”

“Government-run charity. Well, we’ve gotten real generous donations from the acting head of the Genoard family for generations. We’re guaranteed the minimum necessary environment for drug treatment and the like.”

“Is that right...?”

Without asking anything else in particular, his eyes returned to the man in the room.

“And anyway, he’s like that all the time. No matter what we do, he doesn’t respond... By the way, how do you know this patient?”

“He’s an old friend.”

“.....”

The nurse didn’t say anything. This man, who only seemed to be thirty or so, had called himself a friend of a man who’d survived for decades without eating. They’d been warned by the FBI not to interfere with this patient. Who on earth was this guy?

The question had been bothering the nurse for ages, but he didn’t ask it.

Even when Maiza entered the room, Begg showed no reaction.

“These days, there are drugs in circulation that are far more impressive than what you made. Drugs that bring people happiness, and drugs that bring them misfortune.”

Remembering that earlier time, Maiza sat down beside Begg.

“There are substances in urban back alleys whose effects and side effects are dozens of times greater than those of the narcotics you compounded. It’s incredible how many people use those substances in the full knowledge that nearly eighty percent of them will die... Humans truly are beings beyond imagining.”

He went on to speak to him about a variety of other things, but no light appeared in the man’s eyes.

“Begg...”

Slowly, Maiza lifted his right hand, then placed it on Begg’s forehead.

If he was just going to spend eternity wandering in darkness this way, wouldn’t it be better to—?

The moment that doubt reared its head, he caught a familiar name in the man’s mutterings.

“...Czes, over there...ship’s hold...see...take a look...on this ship...to America...”

When he heard those fragmented words, Maiza quietly lowered his right hand.

Right now, Begg had returned to a time when he was happy. It was a conversation from when he and a child who’d been on the ship with him had gone exploring.

“I’ll come again.”

As Maiza quietly made to leave, Begg murmured in a voice that was suddenly clear:

“Maiza, thank you...for...not...eating...me.”

The nurse looked up, startled, but Begg did nothing else.

As if I could possibly get angry...

Pulling his hat low on his head, Maiza left the hospital.

“How was he?”

Outside, a boy who looked about ten years old had waited for him.

“He’s all right. He seems a little tired, but he’ll recover someday.”

As he spoke, Maiza got behind the wheel of a passenger car.

“Someday, for sure...”

Without saying anything else, Maiza let the boy into the car, then drove away.

For the first time in decades, they were headed back to New York.



DOPE ADDICT

One day in January, 1932

Ahhhh, this feels great. Absolute tops.

...But I get the feeling there's something else.

Something's missing. What could it be...? It feels like I've gotta remember.

Everything's here. It's all here, inside my brain.

Everything's melting together right before my eyes. Ah, the sky and the ground and the forest and the town and the day and the night are all melting together messily. Is this reality, in the end? My fingers are melting, too; my arms, my legs, my hips, my stomach, my chest, my bones, my heart... They're melting, blending with everything around me. I'm enfolding everything I see. The world itself has gotten inside me.

My eyeballs have started to melt. Ohh, I can see everywhere, from everything in the world.

But then, for the first time, I start to wonder what this world is shaped like.

I remove my half-melted eyeballs from the world and try looking in from the outside.

At last, I've completely merged with the world. In other words, the world is me.

At that point, I finally realize what it is the world doesn't have.

Except for me, there's nobody here.

".....y, Roy....."

Somebody's calling me.

Who is it? It doesn't matter who; I've got to see them. I'm here, I'm right here. The world of my body has started to crumble. It's turned into tens of thousands of hands, and they're coming after me, trying to grab my eyeballs. Knock it off; don't engulf me. Oh, the voice—the voice is getting farther away. Stop it, stopstopstopstopstop

the hell out, you pile of crap?!

“Roy..... Roy.....”

My body's been thrown to the bottom of a deep ocean. Forget chaos, it's a pitch-black world, and there's absolutely nothing around me. I've gotta get to the surface fast. I'll drown. The closer I get to the light at the surface, the brighter the world gets. The sky and the ground and the people and the town and the day and the night all appear in the shapes I remember. The light illuminates my memories, making them clearer and clearer, and my mind desperately crawls upward, clawing through the water, toward the surface, toward that voice.

“Roy!”

Then my body finally reaches the surface.



When I opened my eyes, I was in a place that looked like a hospital room.

“Oh, thank God! You're awake, aren't you?!”

“Edith...”

When I looked around, I recognized the hospital. It was Fred's hospital, in the East Village. They brought me here before, when I hurt my neck real bad. I'd heard he was away traveling and that the place was closed, but I guess it opened up again at some point.

An old guy who stank like liquor and another guy with bandages wrapped around his legs and face were in the beds on either side of me.

“I see he's come to.”

The doctor, who was dressed all in gray, spoke to us. Yeah, that's Fred for sure. There was a guy who looked like an assistant beside him; I wondered when he'd hired somebody like that.

“You come here every time you use any sort of drug. We don't handle drug addictions as a rule, but in your case, you're always badly injured.”

Then, making the man who seemed to be his assistant bring the implements over, he began to examine my bandaged right arm.

He didn't reproach me or lecture me about having messed with drugs, and when the treatment was over, he left the room right away. This doctor's always like that.

When I happened to look to the side, Edith was watching me like she wanted to say something.

"Thanks, Edith. That was seriously all my fault." I decided to apologize first, before she called me an idiot.

I'm completely pathetic. I bet she calls me an idiot again.

"I'm so glad... When you didn't wake up, I didn't know what I was going to do..."

She *didn't* call me an idiot. It felt weird.

Neither of us knew what to say to the other, and silence flowed between us. Breaking it, Edith raised her voice, as if she'd suddenly remembered something. "Oh... That's right, of course. About that truck."

Truck? ...Oh, I remember. She probably means the truck I stole and used to ram the Runorata carriers' car. Right: Either way, I'll be going to the cops after this. What do I do...?

I started to feel like something was squeezing my belly. Still, it's a fact that I did it. I'd have to suck it up and turn myself in.

At that, Edith smiled brightly and said something weird:

"Listen, you don't have to worry. *It's all taken care of.*"

"Huh?"

"The Gandors intervened and paid the owner for the truck and everything. In other words, they negotiated an out-of-court settlement, without going through the police."

"An out-of-court... I don't have that kinda money..."

The next instant, Edith said something straight-up crazy.

"With borrowed money, of course. From the Gandors... *You* borrowed it."

"Huh? Uh? Wha—?"

"The interest is something awful, but if you buckle down and work hard, you'll be able to pay it all back someday. The Gandors' loan sharks are famous for being better than some!"

When Edith had gotten that far, she smiled quietly and stroked my cheek.

"You need to pay for the crimes you committed. I'm the guarantor, so I'll be able to help you a little. The Gandors say they'll point you toward a job, too, so let's pay it back, bit by bit. Oh, and don't forget to go apologize to the truck's owner."

They got me.

Just when I thought I'd escaped the Runorata Grim Reapers, the Gandor hyenas got me by the throat. I couldn't run now, and if I did any more drugs, the Gandors would probably ice me on the spot. Hard work: That was the only way out of this.

From the way Edith looked, she knew all that. It felt like she had me right in the palm of her hand. I had a hunch that from now on, I

wouldn't be able to defy Edith for as long as I lived... But even that was fine. For now, I could let myself think that way. Just for now.

...Still, something was off. It felt like something was missing.

Am I still in the dream? Have I not woken up yet?

I looked at Edith, meaning to say something, and then, for the first time, I realized she was different from before.

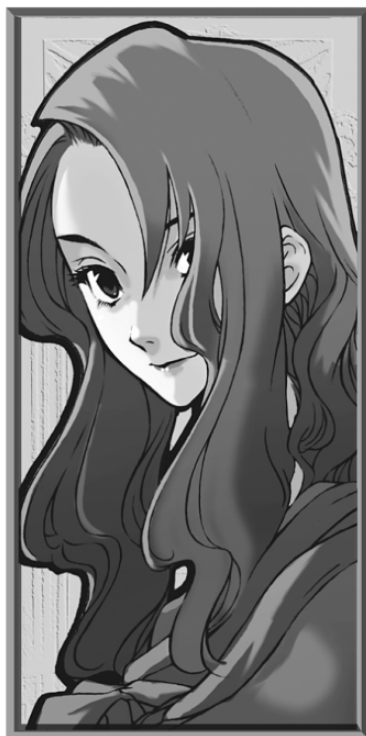
"Is your hair a little shorter?"

"It took you long enough to notice—idiot."

When I heard that word, I was finally sure I was awake.

"It looks good. Yeah, it looks really good on you."

Somehow, I felt kinda happy.



POSTLUDE



POSTLUDE

The sun had long since set over the streets of Manhattan.

In a corner of Hell's Kitchen, a little melody played.

The sound, performed on an old organ, seemed to be celebrating someone's modest happiness.

As if it were declaring the end of one story and beginning to tell another.

It flowed, soaking in, echoing through the sooty gray streets.

Far and wide, on and on...

Baccano! 1932—*The End*

AFTERWORD

First, my sincere thanks for reading this afterword, too.

...And so: Hello, this is Narita.

My goal this time? “Write a heartwarming story.”

After I had the manuscript checked, when I said, “The theme this time around is ‘heartwarming,’” my editor, Chief Editor Suzuki, said, “.....Huh?!” and his eyes got really wide. That concerned me a bit, but at any rate, I tried to make this story heartwarming.

When I reread it, even I thought, “Heartwarming?” and had slight doubts, but, well... Everybody has their own standard for “heartwarming,” so whether you—the readers—find it warm and fuzzy or gritty, I hope you enjoy it.

This story deals with a certain incident in Manhattan that’s separate from the other stories, but some of its timeline overlaps with the previous story, *Baccano! 1931*. They’re linked in places, too, so if you read it together with the previously released volumes in the *Baccano!* series, I think you’ll probably enjoy it more. If you don’t enjoy it...I’m sorry.

When I was creating the story for *Baccano!*, I imagined a spiral, and for the sequel *1931*, I visualized two parallel train tracks.

Just when I was thinking about what to do next, I got the opportunity to see the video *Endless Dominos*. I thought it was really neat how the ring of dominos fell and rose again, around and around, and that led me to the story for this volume. I added “information”—an element that is, in a way, less realistic than the immortals—to that ring of dominos, and the result was this structure.

In this story, the protagonist is even less clear than before, but in any case, for the group of stories that have “Baccano!” in their titles, even I don’t have one particular protagonist picked out. If I get the chance to release more *Baccano!* books, completely new characters may take the stage, or I might write stories that focus on familiar characters or on characters that have only appeared in a few lines up until now. I hope you’ll expect a different character to be the protagonist every time and look forward to it... Assuming they let me keep writing the series, that is. As a matter of fact, at the time when I’m writing this, Volume 2 hasn’t been released yet, so I really have no idea how it’s going over.

This time, all sorts of things happened, and they let me release three months in a row. When I finished writing the second book, I casually mentioned wanting to try doing a three-month series, and a few weeks later, I got a call from my editor, Suzuki...

"Uh, they green-lighted the three-month serial release."

"No way?! Seriously?! They're actually going to let me write that?!"

"Yeah, actually, the president gave his approval, so if you don't send them in, we'll have problems."

"...Right." (P-presidential approval?! What's up with that?! What would have happened if he hadn't approved it?!)

And so I kept on writing with trickles of cold sweat running down my spine, but Suzuki the editor and Enami the illustrator probably had it a whole lot rougher than I did. While I was writing, I heard other writers and editorial staff members saying, "Suzuki looked like he was having a tough time," and "Enami's working really, really hard," and while I did feel guilty, I was also very grateful. I hope my writing was able to live up to that...

In any case, I plan to work on a non-*Baccano!* one-shot story and simultaneously keep writing *Baccano!* as I get new ideas.

At the very least, my current objectives are to study hard every day and work to create my own style, so that the PR department staff doesn't tell me, "It's not humanly possible to advertise your books!" and come after me with chainsaws... And I get the feeling that not only have I written this sort of thing three times, but the objectives keep changing on me... It must be *déjà vu*.

* As usual, everything from this point on is thank-yous.

To Chief Editor Suzuki and the people of the sales, PR, and editorial departments, for whom I caused even more trouble than usual with this three-month serial release.

To the copy editors, who checked my vast number of typos, dropped characters, and ungrammatical sentences, and also to the designers who made the book look good.

To my family, friends, and acquaintances, to whom I'm indebted for all sorts of things, and particularly to the good people of S City, who helped create Samantha's mixed dialect.

To "T," who was kind enough to tell me about their experiences for certain descriptive passages (no more "experiencing," a'right?).

To the great Katsumi Enami, who, during this three-month serial release, was terribly busy with three books' worth of designs for

mostly new characters and with illustrations for *Dengeki hp* posters and still managed to make them all fantastic.

To you, the readers who picked up this book, too.

And to the people who hadn't read one of my books before.

My apologies for saying something similar to what I said at the beginning, but everyone mentioned above has my deepest gratitude.

July 2003, at my place

Listening to the noise that plays in the background of *Eraserhead* (directed by David Lynch).

Ryohgo Narita